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Judson Philips—Loring Brent

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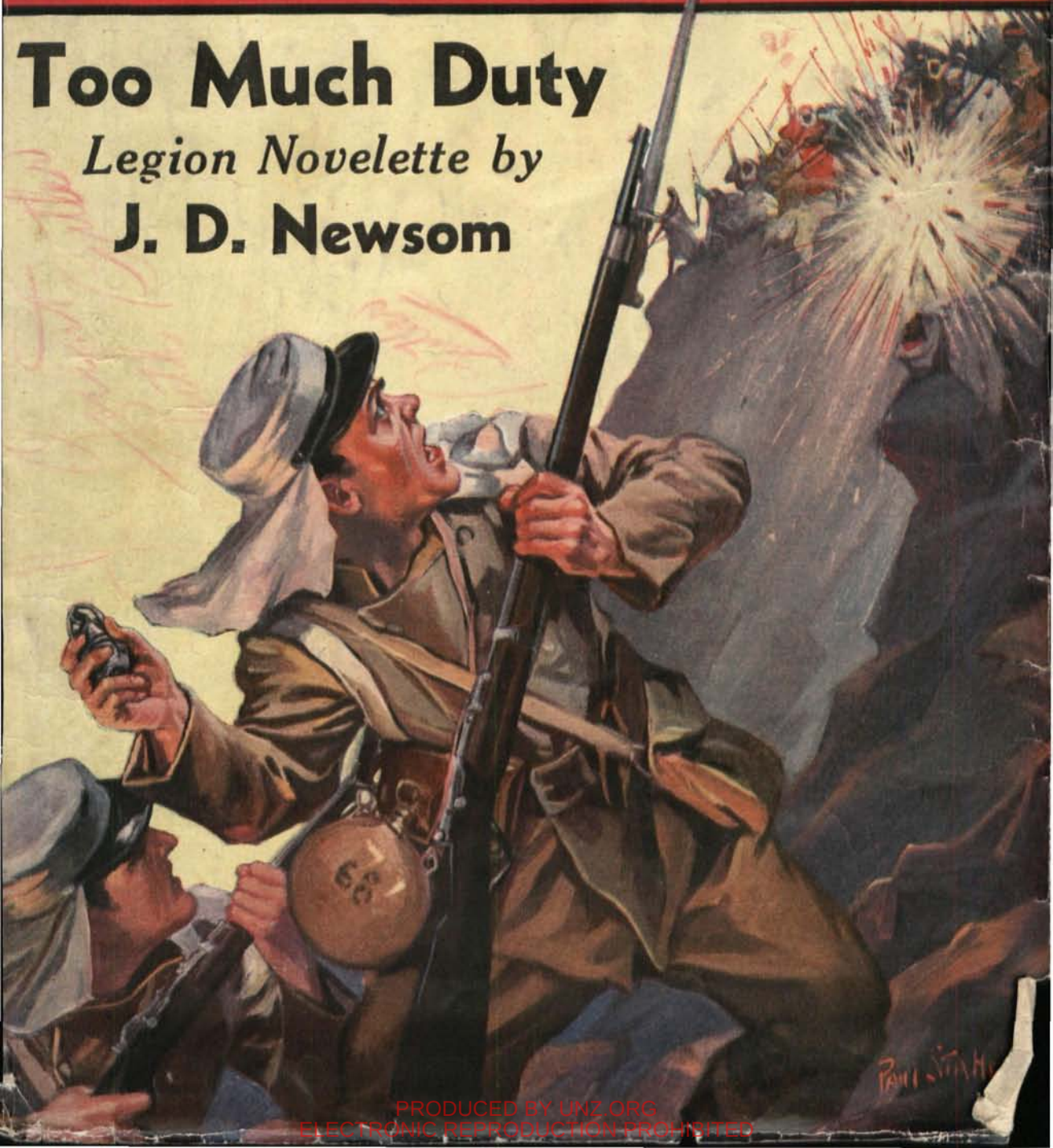
Legion Novelette by

J. D. Newsom



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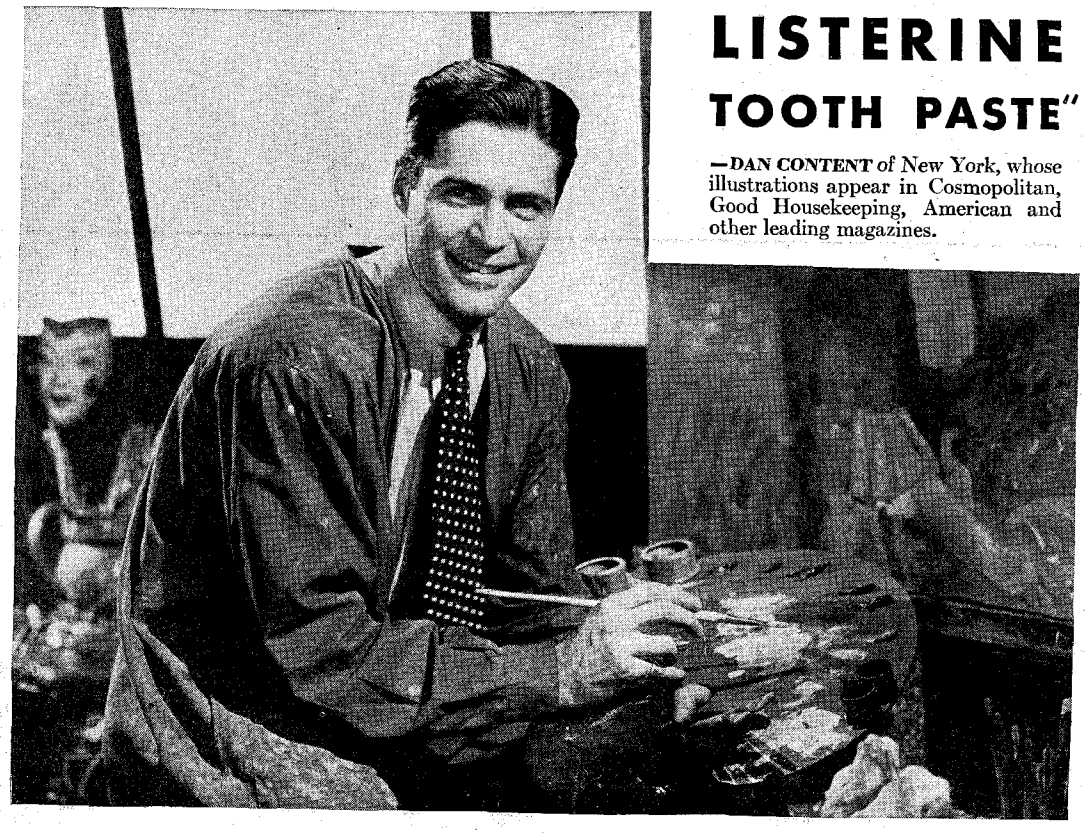

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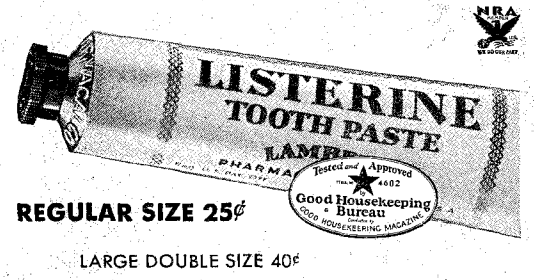

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Action Stories of Every Variety

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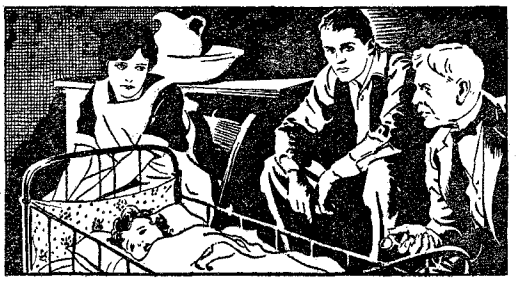

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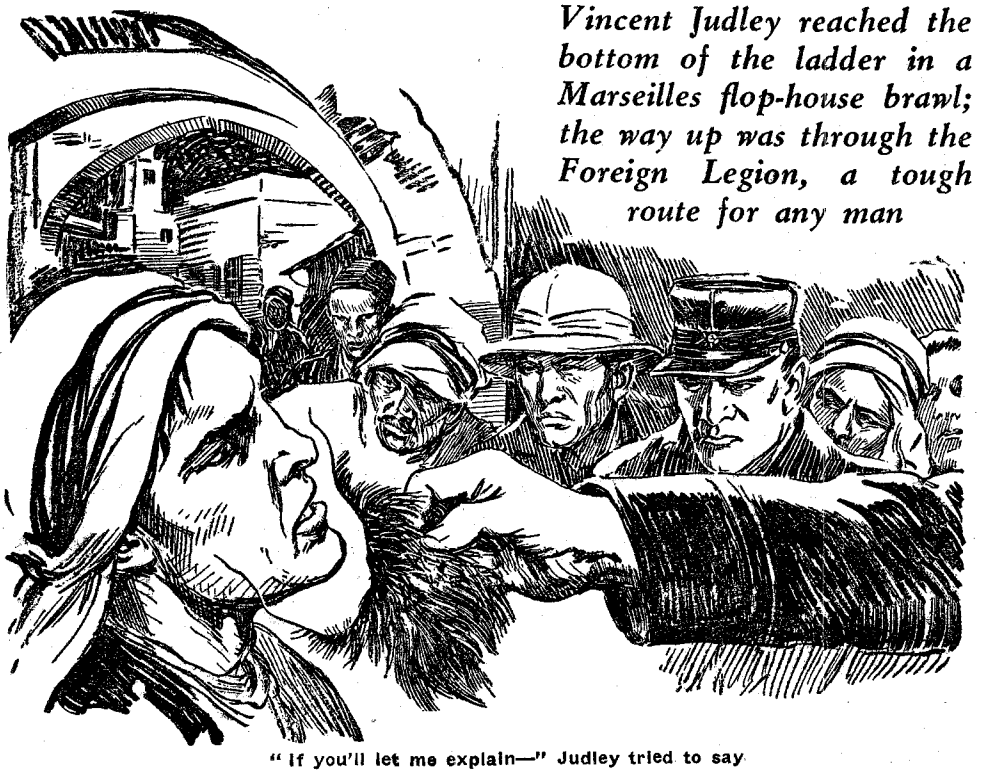
Too Much Duty

By J. D. NEWSOM

Author of "One Man's Meat," "Lion of Morocco," etc.

Novelette—Complete

Vincent Judley reached the bottom of the ladder in a Marseilles flop-house brawl; the way up was through the Foreign Legion, a tough route for any man



"If you'll let me explain—" Judley tried to say

CHAPTER I.

COMRADES IN MISERY.

SPARTOZZA, the owner of the flop-house, tossed the coin into the till and jerked his thumb in the direction of the flight of steps at the end of the passage.

"First door on your right," he grunted. "It's crowded but you'll be able to squeeze in somewhere."

Vincent Judley shuddered inside his rain soaked coat. Water dribbled off the brim of his hat. Dragging his feet, he shuffled across the room, but on the threshold he stopped and inquired apologetically in very bad French:

"How about drying these clothes of mine? If I could have a blanket or something . . ."

A look of wrathful scorn swept over Spartozza's greasy, bloated face.

"What's that you said? A blanket—for one franc? If it's charity you want, why the hell didn't you go to the *Asile?* All you verminous tramps whining about wet clothes! And what of it? Water won't hurt a rat like you. If you want a bed and a cover it'll cost you a franc extra. Got it?"

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Judley was too cold and exhausted to put up much of an argument. He had not eaten for thirty-six hours. The walls of his stomach were hard and tight, and his chest felt queerly empty.

"I could pay you tomorrow," he began. "You see . . ."

Spartozza, who was finishing a midnight snack of bread and wine and sausage, wiped the crumbs out of his mustache and stood up. Thick-set and fat, he bore down upon Judley, holding out his hand, palm turned upward. Dirt was embedded in the lines of his palm. The pungent reek of garlic on his breath made Judley's mouth water.

"You'll pay me now or shut up," he announced. "I don't give a curse whether you go or come or die of pneumonia. That's the best thing that could happen to you—pneumonia. All you waterfront loafers are alike. You're too lazy to breathe."

Something about Judley's appearance suddenly caught his eye. Judley was dirty and bedraggled, but his clothes were not the nondescript rags of the general run of Marseilles wharf rats. The coat and the pants not only matched, they looked as though they might have been specially made for their present owner—an unprecedented occurrence at Spartozza's. Furthermore, beneath the grime and the bristles on his sunken cheeks Judley had none of the marks of the genuine *clochard*. There was a difference about him, a lack of resolution which convinced Spartozza that he was dealing with an outcast from the upper rungs of the social scale.

"Tell it to the courtmartial," the sergeant snarled

Spartozza gave a snort of contempt. He liked 'em tough and brutal. This bird was polite. He had manners, the poor fool!

"And so what?" demanded the *patron,* jiggling his outstretched palm within an inch of Judley's nose. "Where's that extra franc? Don't tell me you're so mean you'd rather sleep on the floor than on a good dry bed!"

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"I'm sorry but I have no more money," Judley confessed. "I haven't worked for a week and . . ."

Spartozza grabbed him by the lapels of his coat, pinned him against the wall and frisked him with callous thoroughness. Judley had not lied. He did not have a sou. His one and only possession was a dog-eared wallet containing some newspaper clippings which did not hold Spartozza's attention. What he wanted was money. Finding none, he swung Judley around and clouted him in the small of the back.

"Get up those stairs or get out. On your way!"

Judley crept up the creaking steps. He did not have strength enough to resent the indignities heaped upon him by the *patron*. Nothing mattered just then except sleep and oblivion.

The door stood wide open. The only light in the room came from a street lamp shining through the uncurtained, rain streaked window panes. It threw queer patterns on the ceiling; the floor, where men snored and gargled, was in semi-darkness.

As soon as his eyes became accustomed to the shadows, Judley picked his way over the tangle of arms and legs until he found a vacant spot just beneath the windowsill. It was unoccupied, he discovered when he hunkered down, because an icy draft whistled through a cracked pane.

He sneezed violently and said "Damn it all!" beneath his breath. The next moment he was startled to hear a voice whisper close to his ear:

"Forgive me, but was it 'damn it' I heard you remark?"

THE speaker, a small man with a sharp-featured countenance, thin to the point of emaciation, sat with his back to the wall, nursing his knees between his clasped hands. His eyes, which were extraordinarily bright and sharp, glowed with subdued excitement. His lips twitched as though he were struggling to keep back a torrent of words.

Judley stared at him uneasily. He had not been spoken to in his native tongue for weeks on end, but he was not yet accustomed to the free and easy ways of flop-house inmates, and he was not sure whether he ought to curl up and pretend to sleep or whether he ought to answer his neighbor's question. In the end he followed the easiest course.

"So you speak English?" he commented.

It was the very opening the man had been waiting for.

"You are surprised, is it not?" he whispered. "But I recognize you at once when you come in. My discernment is very rapid. 'There,' I said to myself, 'is an American or perhaps an Englishman.' Now I know for a certainty that you are from America. It is the accent, yes?"

Judley grumbled "Uh-huh," and was about stretch out full length on the boards when it dawned upon him that he was sitting in a puddle of very wet water.

"Move this way," urged his neighbor. "Yes—a wet spot. That is why it was not preëmpted long ago."

"Preëmpted" was a startling word to hear at two o'clock in the morning in the lousiest flop-house in Marseilles, but it failed to make any impression upon Judley whose numb brain cried out for sleep. Sleep, however, was the very last thing the talkative Frenchman intended to let him have.

"In the past," he explained, "I had many American friends. But I have never been to America. I studied the

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language at school. All the gems of your literature. Milton, Shakespeare, Congreve, Lamb. I have read them all." He hitched himself around, smiling eagerly as he peered at Judley. "Tell me, you find it strange to hear such talk from a *clochard*—what you would call the vagabond—in such a place?"

He spoke with such obvious self-satisfaction that Judley experienced a slight twinge of resentment. He did not mind being punched half as much as he objected to being patronized.

"What's so strange about it?" he mumbled. "I've read plenty of French books, but I'm not boasting about it. Move over, I want to stretch out."

"Books!" the man exclaimed in a sharp undertone, as though he were a teacher questioning an untruthful pupil. "What books have you read, may I ask?"

"Plenty," Judley said sullenly, "and for God's sake let me sleep!"

His request fell on deaf ears. The man edged over still closer.

"Have you read Proust, Gide, Anatole France, Montaigne or Voltaire? All these a man must read if he aspires to a true cultivation of the spirit." He bent over Judley, who was easing himself down on one elbow, and breathed in his face. "I am wide awake. How can one close one's eyes in this Gehenna? This is the bottom of the abyss, is it not? And yet if I were to tell you who I am you would be astounded! My name is Fourment, Lucien Fourment."

Judley, in those days, was not hot tempered. In fact, he was long suffering and inoffensive, but Fourment's endless chatter rubbed him very much the wrong way.

"Listen," he broke in with bitter irony, "if *I* told you who I am you'd be more than astounded—you'd throw a fit. Good night."

IRONY, however, was wasted on Fourment. Leaning forward, he rested one hand on Judley's arm and said earnestly:

"My friend, I see that you are no ordinary *clochard*. Like myself you have fallen upon evil days, is it not? We are comrades in misfortune. What was it King Lear said about adversity?"

Judley did not know what King Lear had said and he cared less. He was exasperated because Fourment's talkativeness had dispelled his lethargy and roused him to a pitch of uneasy, expectant wakefulness.

"Now look here," he protested. "That's all very well, but—"

"I see you do not know your classics!" Fourment informed him. "Ah, my friend, what treasures you have missed. Had I not had a well stocked mind I should have gone mad while I was in prison."

"I'll bet," Judley commented sourly.

"Yes," Fourment went on. "I have been in prison. You will sympathize with me, I am sure. I am no ordinary criminal. When sentence was passed upon me I thanked my judges. 'I committed this crime in a moment of folly,' I said to them, and—"

Judley edged away. "All right, all right," he agreed. "Don't get excited about nothing. You oughtn't to talk about all that."

"And why not? I want to expiate my antisocial behavior! I shall make amends and retrieve my lost honor!"

After that he was off to a flying start. Nothing short of death or dynamite could have checked him. Once, he explained, he had been an officer of the French army, a lieuten-

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ant attached to a regiment of the line. He deserved great credit, for his parents had been poor but thrifty shopkeepers who had bled themselves white to give him an education. If he did say so himself he had been a brilliant scholar, and every one had predicted that he would climb to the highest pinnacles of his profession.

His career, alas, had been ruined by a black-hearted though beautiful girl who had lured him far from the path of duty. She knew that he had no income but his pay, but she demanded unimaginable luxuries such as platinum wrist watches, sables, and sports roadsters. For her sake he had burdened himself with debts, and in the end, driven frantic by her exigencies, he had plundered the regimental mess fund which had been entrusted to his care because he was good at figures.

HIS story had a moral ending. He had been arrested, tried by courtmartial, found guilty, cashiered, and sent to prison at hard labor for a term of one year.

"I was released two days ago," he concluded, "but I did not have the courage to go home. I shall not go home until I have rehabilitated myself. My parents they are heartbroken with the disgrace!"

"What about the girl?" inquired Judley, interested despite himself in Fourment's tale of woe.

Fourment shrugged his shoulders as high as his ears. "Gone! I no longer care for her. I do not even hate her. The past is dead. Today I am looking forward."

"You're lucky."

Judley's dejected tone caused Fourment to prick up his ears.

"You, too—it is a woman has brought you here?"

After a moment of deep thought Judley drew his dog-eared wallet from his pocket and fished out a newspaper clipping. It was so damp that it tore when he unfolded it.

"Take a look at that," he advised. "There's a hard luck story for you all right."

Fourment stood up and examined the clipping by the blurred light slanting upward from the street.

Across the top of the strip there was a three-column cut of a dashing lady of sophisticated charms, dressed in the height of fashion, leaning on the arm of a tall, slender young man with a gardenia in the lapel of his morning coat and a top hat in his hand. The lady smiled triumphantly, the young man looked rather sheepish.

The caption above the picture read "Wealthy Widow Nabs New Mate," and beneath it, "Cameraman snaps Mrs. Louisa Krepping, wife of the late Andrew G. Krepping, millionaire machine tool manufacturer, and Vincent Ronald Judley, junior clerk of the First Street National Bank, just before their surprise wedding yesterday outside the marriage clerk's office at city hall."

"*Mon Dieu!*" gulped Fourment. "And this is...you?"

"That's me," nodded Judley. "How's this for a come-down?"

Before Fourment could speak a man on the opposite side of the room sat up and threatened to cut their throats from ear to ear unless they shut their putrescent traps. Fifty angry voices joined in. Fourment crouched down close to the wall, making himself as small and inconspicuous as possible until the storm of abuse died down.

When silence reigned again he nudged Judley's elbow and breathed:

"Did she leave you?"

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Judley shook his head. "I left her. Couldn't stand it. I put on my hat and walked out."

"Well done!" approved Fourment. "Bravo!"

Judley pulled a long, sour face. "You're crazy! Why, three months ago I was living at the finest hotel in Paris . . . and now look at me—wet and hungry and full of bugs."

Fourment was very much impressed. His eyes grew round with awe.

"This lady," he inquired, "she is very, very rich?"

"M' wife? Rich? I can't begin to tell you. She's one of the ten richest women in America, and that's saying something."

"But why . . . but you . . . but how?" stammered Fourment. "I comprehend nothing. You say you left her of your own free will . . .?"

"It's just one of those things," Judley confessed without enthusiasm. "They happen . . ."

Slipping his hand inside his shirt he scratched his ribs while he groped about in his mind for a rational explanation of his rash behavior.

IN retrospect he found it hard to account for anything. He had been an obscure paying teller living contentedly on thirty-five dollars a week. No overwhelming ambition spurred him on. Life had ambled along, pleasantly monotonous, with an occasional party at Bruno's once or twice a month to liven things up. It had not occurred to him that he was particularly good looking until Mrs. Krepping, the bank's star customer, had rushed him off his feet. She was thirty-three and experienced. Judley was twenty-four. He thought he had the wisdom of a serpent and the savior-faire of a Russian grand duke, whereas, in reality, he was as guileless as a new-born babe. In Mrs. Krepping's hands he was clay, mushy and inconsistent clay.

The wedding ceremony had been an intimate affair attended by not more than two dozen grinning cameramen and reporters. Their questions had not embarrassed the bride, but they had made Judley feel distinctly squeamish. He felt much worse when he read the blistering comments of the local press, so to shield him from the ribald laughter his wife had wafted him away to Paris.

Nothing was too good for Vincent in her estimation. Nothing, perhaps, except his liberty. She had bought and paid for him. He was her exclusive property. At first he had been too dazed to protest. Too many luxuries had an anæsthetic effect upon him, but by degrees he began to experience the same sort of feeling of discomfort that creeps over a patient coming out of the ether after a serious operation. As time went on these twinges became more and more acute. He couldn't call his soul his own. He was at Louisa's beck and call, almost on the same footing as her personal maid.

She was far too wealthy to be snubbed by her friends, but behind her back these same friends treated Judley with icy contempt and took a delight in insulting him with dexterous politeness.

He was torn ten different ways. One part of his brain assured him that he had made a good bargain and ought to stick to it, but another part of his mind was poisoned by the knowledge that he was about as mean and noisome a worm as ever wore a pair of pants.

It could not last. It didn't. The break came one morning while Mathews, his English valet, was helping him into his coat. Word came that Mrs.

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Krepping-Judley had changed their plans for the day; they were lunching with Lady Wycombe, and would Mr. Judley call for her, please, at eleven thirty sharp.

Mathews was shocked to hear his master say emphatically:

"To hell with Lady Wycombe, that old battle-ax!"

"Quite so, sir," agreed Mathews, who always agreed with his gentlemen.

"And," added Judley, wheeling upon the valet, "to hell with you."

There was such a peculiar look in his eye that Mathews backed hastily away.

"If I have given offense . . ." he began.

From his wallet Judley drew a roll of bills which he thrust into Mathews's hand.

"Now get this straight, you ham-faced baboon," he said quickly. "I'm not mad. I'm absolutely sane. Shove that money out of sight and forget it. It's yours. You're going to give me a fifteen minutes' start and then you're going to take a message to Mrs. Judley."

At a rough guess Mathews held in his trembling hand five hundred dollars, or one hundred pounds or ten thousand francs.

"A message, sir?" he repeated.

"And don't use the telephone," warned Judley, "because telephones aren't refined enough for us. I want you to tell Mrs. Judley's maid to tell Mrs. Judley's secretary to tell Mrs. Judley herself that Mr. Judley sends his compliments and says he's gone out and will not be coming back — ever. You understand that, Mathews, you cockeyed blatherskite? Never!"

"Never!" echoed the valet, tightening his grip on the roll of bills. "Quite so, sir."

"Fine!" nodded Judley. "If any explanations are required you tell Mrs. Judley that I appreciate everything she has done for me, but that we're all washed up. I'm sick of caviar and champagne. I'm sick of you and chauffeurs and flunkies and silk pajamas and monogrammed underwear. I want to find out what it feels like to be dirty and hungry and out of work. I'm going to work for my keep. I'm going to sweat for it."

It had taken him three months to drift from Paris to Marseilles, from the gaudy magnificence of a hotel on the Champs Elysées to the squalor of a Marseilles flop-house. Jobs had been few and far between and dubious. He had worked as a courier for a family of Brazilians, as a garage attendant, as a stevedore, slipping farther down the chute at each step until at last he had reached the gutter. Now he was too weak and sick for the backbreaking work on the docks. Labor contractors cursed him for wasting their time. One glance was enough to tell them that he did not belong to the hard-bitten brotherhood that hangs onto the outermost fringe of society by the skin on its teeth. It was as though the ghost of a white collar clung to his neck and this trace of gentility was a source of endless trouble. Because of it he was cheated and robbed and beaten up without mercy.

"I WANTED hard knocks," he told Fourment. "I got 'em. I'm no good."

"You are very brave!"

"Don't you believe it. I can't take it. If only I could get good and mad—mad all the way through—but I can't. I get rattled. I've been elbowed out of line at the Free Soup Kitchen by coots of sixty, and I haven't had

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enough nerve to get mad. I'm a failure."

"You must not say that. I have an idea—"

"I know damn well I'm a failure," Judley persisted. "Last Monday I caved in. I wrote to my wife and said I'd come back if she would have me."

"And?"

"And nothing. Not a word. I've been to the post office every day waiting for the Paris mail to come in. Hanging around . . . waiting. I was thrown out yesterday for loitering."

"My friend," Fourment said earnestly, "*my* plans are made. In the morning I am joining the French Foreign Legion, and *you* are coming with me. That is the proper place for both of us. A new beginning. I shall not rest until I have regained my rank and wiped out the memory of my . . . my mistake. My poor mother . . ."

"Forget it. I'm no soldier."

"Ah, but in the Legion they will make a soldier of you," promised Fourment. "It is a splendid life. Hard and dangerous and clean. You learn to obey and to serve."

"No," said Judley.

Fourment swept this objection aside. "You are a man of education," Fourment summed up. "You have intelligence. You can make a position for yourself in the Legion. It is a career for any man."

"But not for me. If only she answers my letter, I—"

"*Vos gueules!* Shut up!" roared a man, struggling to his feet. "You lice, I'll brain you for this. All night long it goes on. Hiss—hiss—hiss! Like escaping gas."

Other men joined in, and in a moment the room was in an uproar. Some one heaved a shoe at Fourment's head. It bounced off his ear and shattered a pane of glass. Rain and a blast of icy wind swept across the floor. And almost before the last piece of glass touched the ground, Spartozza came pounding up the steps. In one hand he held a storm lantern, in the other a three-foot length of lead pipe.

He was greeted by a raucous bellow that shook the walls. A practical joker heaved an old sardine can at him. It struck his neck and hurt him just enough to make him lose all restraint.

"Who broke that window?" he thundered, swinging the lead pipe at him as he strode across the room.

"He did!" swore the *clochards,* kicking Fourment in the stomach. "He wouldn't shut up. It hasn't stopped once. Him and that other specimen of a herring-face."

Spartozza's great paw closed around Fourment's neck.

"Who's going to pay for that pane?" he demanded, shaking his victim with great violence. "Who? You are. Twenty francs. Let's have 'em."

"I have not got twenty francs," gasped Fourment; "and anyway, I did not break—"

"Then I'll take it out on your hide," promised Spartozza. "Come on!"

Dragging Fourment behind him he stamped out of the room and lugged him down the steps like an empty sack.

JUDLEY followed close behind, driven out by the indignant hobos.

Sick with fear, he saw Spartozza stop at the foot of the stairs, drop his piece of lead pipe, and smash his fist against the side of Fourment's head.

Fourment dropped and Spartozza kicked him down the corridor toward the street. The sound of the blows and Fourment's cries filled the narrow passageway. Judley stood stockstill until the light of a gas jet fell upon Four-

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ment's face. It looked dead. The eyes were closed, the mouth sagged open. Blood dribbled down one cheek.

Then from one second to the next, Judley's terror gave way to unthinking, primitive rage. The piece of lead pipe lay at his feet. He snatched it up and rushed at Spartozza. The *patron* saw him coming and struck him a tremendous clout full in the face. The force of the blow ground the bridge of his nose to pulp and hurled him back against the wall. But he felt no pain. The heavy weapon in his hand seemed to be guided by a supernatural force over which he had no control. It crashed down on Spartozza's elbow. The *patron* let out a great howl of pain. Gritting his teeth, Judley sprang forward and struck him again. The lead pipe grazed Spartozza's shoulder and thudded against his jaw. He crumpled up. His jaw was horribly lopsided; pushed up under his right ear. Pink foam dribbled over his lips.

For a long moment nothing happened. A tomblike silence weighed down upon the narrow passage where the gas jet hissed and Spartozza's labored breath gurgled in his throat. Judley stood rooted to the ground until Fourment struggled to his feet and croaked:

"We must get out of here at once. You hear what I say? At once! He is dying."

"He asked for it."

"That has nothing to do with it. All these *patrons* are police informers. Nobody will believe us. A *clochard* never gets a fair trial. Do you want to spend the rest of your days in prison?"

An hour later they sat huddled on the lee side of a stack of stinking goat hides on the Syria dock. At regular intervals the red flash of the lighthouse stabbed through the rain-swept darkness setting fire to the blank wall of a concrete warehouse.

Judley sheltered his swollen, aching nose in the palm of his hand. It was so sore that he could not touch it, and it would not stop bleeding.

"The best thing I can do," he decided, "is to go to the nearest police station and surrender. I need a doctor."

"You must not do that," Fourment protested. "It would be suicide. If Spartozza dies you are lost. In the morning you must come with me to join the Foreign Legion. They will not ask any questions about our bruises at the recruiting office, nor do you have to produce any papers of identity. And once you are in the Legion the police will not bother you. You will be safe and have a doctor to examine your nose."

"I tell you I don't want to join your confounded Legion," Judley snuffled half-heartedly.

"The Legion or prison. You must choose."

He talked and argued and pleaded and in the end his perseverance was rewarded. Just before daybreak Judley said dismally:

"Maybe you're right. After all, why not? God knows, there's nothing else I can do."

"*Magnifique!*" cried Fourment. "You will have no regrets, that I promise you. Nothing shall part us, Judley, my old one. We are comrades in arms from now on, is it not?"

CHAPTER II.

THE LETTER.

THEY washed the worst of the dirt and blood off their faces at a horse trough, and Fourment, who still owned the large sum of five

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francs, treated Judley to coffee and rolls in a basement wine shop where their disreputable appearance aroused no comment. They stayed there until nine o'clock, then Fourment led the way to a huge, somber building with a panoply carved in the stone above the arched entrance.

"This," he announced ecstatically, "is the military headquarters. This is where we enlist."

Joining the Foreign Legion, Judley discovered, was quite painless. A middle-aged sergeant entered his name, age and nationality on a printed form; then a doctor examined him and remarked that, effectively, the septum of his nose "appeared" to have been injured; finally he went back to the sergeant's desk and signed the printed form with a rusty pen which scattered ink spots all over the paper.

The sergeant gave him a bit of paper bearing a smudged rubber stamp and told him to report at once at Fort St. Jean. And that was that.

"Are we in or out?" Judley inquired dazedly as they left the building.

"In!" cried Fourment. "In, my friend. We shall be kept at the fort until the ship leaves for Africa. It is wonderful to be a *militaire* again. I am proud to serve as a common soldier of the second class."

The morning was chilly, but the rain had stopped and a high wind was blowing the clouds from the sky. Fourment pranced along, chin up, chest out, eyes shining, but Judley displayed no such signs of satisfaction. He looked glum and despondent. His footsteps dragged. At last he stopped altogether and said jerkily:

"You go on . . . to this fort. I'll join you later. Don't worry about me . . . I want to find out if there's a letter or something at the post office."

Fourment burst out laughing and smacked him between the shoulder blades.

"I shall go with you, my old one. A minute one way or the other will make no great difference. But why do you bother now about letters? Letters cannot change anything. You must look forward, not to the rear."

"Maybe," admitted Judley, "but I'm going to the post office."

Even though he refused to admit the truth even to himself, he realized that the sole purpose of his side trip to the post office was to delay as long as possible the moment when he would have to report at Fort St. Jean. He expected no mail, and he was stunned when the clerk at the "poste restante" window flipped a telegram across the counter.

He held the envelope at arm's length as though he feared it might bite him.

"*Comment!*" Fourment exclaimed brightly. "You have had a telegram. Take my advice, my good comrade—destroy it. You are a soldier. Your duty comes first."

Both Judley's eyelids were swollen and puffy, but he managed to give Fourment a particularly dirty look. Without a word he tore open the envelope and drew out the message. It was from his wife. It read:

> You are forgiven Stop I thought there was another woman Stop You are a brute Stop I have had a nervous breakdown and am recuperating at Biarritz Stop Mathews leaving by airplane with funds and your clothes Stop Meet him at Hotel Splendide and come at once Stop I have told every one you were called away on business Stop Waiting for you Stop Love Stop
>
> TWEEKS.

JUDLEY'S knees grew so unsteady that he had to sit on a bench between a telephone booth and a writing desk where an elderly lady was

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filling out a postal order blank. When she caught sight of Judley's battered countenance she gave a startled snort and moved as far from him as possible, glancing around to make sure that she was not being left alone in the company of such a horrible creature.

"It's all over," the horrible creature exclaimed. "Good old Louisa. She didn't discharge Mathews! Anyhow, I've taught her a lesson. She can't keep me tied to her apron strings."

Unsmiling and severe, Fourment demanded:

"What is it that is over, if you please?"

Judley handed him the telegram. He read it word for word with great care.

"She would like to have her lap dog back again," he said scornfully. "But you have followed a more manly course, is it not? You have severed the apron strings forever. Yes, indeed, all that is over. You are a Legionaire today—beyond her reach!"

Judley folded the telegram and slipped it into his pocket.

"What's worrying me," he observed, "is how I'm going to get into the Hotel Splendide. They won't let me in in these rags."

"Have you forgotten Spartozza? The police—"

"Forget it. Mrs. Judley knows a flock of politicians in Paris. I'm not worrying about Spartozza any more."

"But the Legion?" Fourment said testily. "What of the Legion? You have taken the oath. We must proceed to the fort and report for duty."

"Go right ahead," urged Judley. "I've had enough hardship to last a lifetime. Maybe I'm a quitter. Maybe I'm a fraud. I should worry! I'm cured. I know which side my bread is buttered on and if—"

Fourment played his trump card.

"She will not look at you now, your wife. You are disfigured. Your nose—ruined! She will be nauseated. You are horrible, I am telling you for your own good."

This sally took all the wind out of Judley's sails. Gingerly he touched his nose. It was in bad shape. But after a moment or so his self-confidence returned. As soon as Mathews provided him with money he could get the best plastic surgeon in Marseilles to patch him up. Noses were easy to fix. They built 'em up or something. In a week he would be presentable again.

"I'll risk it," he told Fourment. "And as for the Legion, they'll have to struggle along without my help. They'll never miss me. Don't say anything about me when you reach the fort. I'll make it worth your while. How about a couple of thousand dollars? No? How about five?"

A dark flush crept into Fourment's bruised and bewhiskered cheeks.

"I am not to be bribed!" he retorted, his voice quivering with indignation. "Judley, I appeal to you, to your sense of honor . . . yes, to your manhood. You must come to the fort. You must do your duty!"

"How about minding your own business for a change?" Judley suggested. "I didn't want to have anything to do with your damned army in the first place. You talked me into it. What's it to you whether I join up or not?"

"I cannot allow you to desert. You have taken an oath of the most sacred and binding."

Judley stood up and held out his hand.

"This is where we part company. Good luck to you, Fourment. Take care of yourself."

"It cannot be good-by!" Fourment

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protested, folding his hands behind his back. "I am appealing to—"

Judley turned on his heel and strode out of the post office. But Fourment followed close behind him, talking a blue streak. He became so excited and emphatic, he was so persistent, that Judley said angrily:

"Clear out before I lose my temper. If you don't, I'll break your neck!"

THE words were hardly out of his mouth before Fourment left his side and darted across the street. Judley's first impression was that Fourment was running away, but the impression was short-lived.

Fourment dashed up to a couple of men in khaki, showed them the stamped paper given him at the recruiting office, and gestured dramatically in Judley's direction.

The two men were members of the *gendarmerie*, a branch of the service which specializes in military police duties. Judley saw them speak a few words to Fourment, nod, hitch up their belts and move majestically across the roadway.

Traffic delayed them. Judley walked on, trying not to hurry. Glancing over his shoulder he spied his pursuers trotting along on the outer edge of the sidewalk. People were stopping, craning their necks to find out who was being chased by the *gendarmes*. Fourment led the way.

Judley lengthened his stride. The *gendarmes* increased their speed. He broke into a run. Instantly a shout went up:

"Arrêtez-le! Stop him!"

And the man-hunt was on. It did not last long, nor go very far. Judley looked so villainous that no one cared to tackle him, otherwise he would not have gone ten steps. For perhaps a hundred yards he held his own, then close behind him he heard some one panting heavily, and all at once a pair of arms closed around his knees and he fell headlong on the asphalt. Rolling over he beheld Fourment clawing at his legs. He tried to hit Fourment, but before he could do so the *gendarmes* and a swarm of infuriated citizens piled on top of him. The barrel of a service revolver rattled against his skull, and the next thing he knew he lay on the floor of a cell at Fort St. Jean.

CHAPTER III.

"DESERTER!"

IT all started when Mercier said, "Let's get ourselves photographed," and the whole gang cheered.

There were five of them, Mercier, Kubiac, Horodinski, Van Horst, and last but not least, Legionaire Vincent Judley. It was pay day. It was ten o'clock at night. All five Legionaires were exceedingly well lit. Since leaving the barracks on the stroke of six they had done all those things which a Legionaire does in Sidi-bel-Abbes when he has a pocket full of money and a midnight pass.

They had imbibed huge quantities of red wine, shouted themselves hoarse while watching the sinuous ripplings of Ouled Nail dancing girls, raised cain, guzzled more wine, and engaged in a splendid fist fight with a crowd of narrow-minded civilians.

Because they still had two hours to spare and a few more francs to spend, Mercier's suggestion met with their whole-hearted approval. Arm in arm, their caps on the backs of their close-cropped heads, they rolled down the

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street in search of a Studio of Photography.

"I'll send one to my wife," proclaimed Judley, "and will she be startled? That'll show her what kind of an egg I am to-day. I'll fix her feet for her."

He beamed idiotically upon his companions. They were the salt of the earth. The Legion itself was very swell. Although he had been at the depot not quite a month so much had happened that, in retrospect, he felt as though he had been there ten years. He had worked like a horse and slept like a log. So long as he obeyed orders and kept his rifle well oiled, nobody gave a damn who he was nor what he had been. He had not had a chance to think about his misfortunes. On parade irate drill sergeants "conditioned" him with grim determination; off parade he had clothes to wash, accouterments to clean and polish, potatoes to peel, beds to make.

The weeks had gone by like lightning. Much to his secret surprise he fitted in, he belonged. His roommates accepted him at his face value, which was nothing to write home about. His crooked, flattened nose had altered his appearance completely. It made him look extremely tough and determined, and he did his best to live up to his unearned reputation.

He had not come in contact with Fourment since the eventful day at Marseilles when he had been arrested and locked in a cell at the fort. From the cell he had been transferred to the infirmary where he had been detained for a week until his wounds healed and his temperature returned to normal. There were no plastic surgeons at the fort; no attempt had been made to restore the symmetry of his features. He had been nursed back to health with great efficiency but no sympathy whatsoever.

An officer had lectured him not unkindly upon the meaning of discipline and the dangers of desertion.

"You have been sufficiently punished," said the officer, gazing upon Judley's lumpy countenance. "I hope you have learned your lesson. With recruits one must be tolerant, but another time don't expect any mercy if you break the law . . . because you won't get it.

"Not in the Legion. Bear that in mind for your own good."

Judley did not attempt to argue, for he was beginning to realize that he was in the grip of a machine which could and would steam-roller him out of existence if he tried to resist. Fourment, he found when he was discharged from the hospital, had already been sent to Africa; and after that he had no leisure to dwell upon the brutal things he had dreamed of doing to that overzealous Frenchman.

Though he hated to admit it, he had had the time of his life, and the wild party which wound up at the photographer's on pay night came as a fitting climax to the weeks of intensive training to which he had been subjected.

SINGLY and in mass formation they posed before the camera while the photographer, a Maltese with a Vandyke beard and artistic manners, twittered with fear lest they smash his gilt sofa and overturn the console on which stood an anemic rubber plant.

Nothing untoward happened until the hilarious troopers spied an Arab bournous hanging on a peg in the curtained recess pompously referred to as the dressing room. Forthwith they decided that they craved an action pic-

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ture of "Legionaires capturing a dangerous rebel."

"I'm the dangerous rebel!" cried Judley, grabbing the bournous.

"He's the dangerous rebel chief," shouted the gang. "Loud cheers for the dangerous rebel!"

"Fancy costumes are five francs extra," quavered the Maltese photographer. "I shall call the police if this keeps up."

They gave him his five francs, and in exchange he provided Judley with a turban, a false beard held in place by a couple of wire loops over the ears, and a long-barreled native gun.

"I'm real," he declared, standing back and squinting at his reflection in a fly-blown mirror. "*Allah il Allah!* I'm 'n Arab. Such whiskers once! I could go from here to Timbuctu and nobody'd know me."

Horodinski, who had drawn his bayonet and was trying to drive it like a rapier through the terrified photographer's heart, stopped his exercises long enough to sneer:

"Why, you poor imbecile, you couldn't go from here to the market square without being spotted. No Arab ever had a mug like yours. And that beard—look at that beard. It's got St. Vitus's dance every time you draw a deep breath."

"What'll you bet?" demanded Judley, draping the bournous over one shoulder after the fashion of a Calabrian bandit. "I'll bet I can walk from here to the market square and back again and not a soul will suspect that I'm not an Arab."

"I'll bet two liters of wine," retorted Horodinski. "You couldn't fool a *gendarme* in that get-up—not even a *gendarme*."

"Done!" cried Judley. "From here to the square, and if I win—"

"No, no and no!" the photographer protested vehemently. "You cannot go out in my costume. It is worth five hundred francs. You cannot wear it off the premises. And put away those bayonets, for the love of God! It is enough to drive one mad, this bedlam."

So they rolled him onto his gilded couch and sat on him, smothering his pathetic cries with moire cushions smelling of patchouli.

Horodinski and Kubiac sat on him; Mercier and Van Horst, acting as umpires, followed twenty paces behind Judley, who went flapping down the street in long, loose-jointed strides which he imagined imitated to perfection the stately tread of a high class native.

As a matter of plain fact his disguise could not have deceived a two year old Eskimo. The beard hung askew and his great hobnailed boots were plainly visible beneath the hem of the bournous.

Mercier and Van Horst cackled with insane laughter as they clung to his footsteps, but the street was deserted and he emerged on the main thoroughfare of Sidi-bel-Abbes without having caused a riot.

Going strong, he sailed around the corner at top speed . . . and collided before he could check his pace with a short, dapper soldier who lost his balance and went sprawling in the middle of the sidewalk. Judley found himself staring into the upturned and wrathful countenance of his old acquaintance, Lucien Fourment, now wearing a corporal's green stripes on his sleeves.

"Imbecile!" Fourment cried furiously, glaring at the fake Arab. "Is this how you show your respect for the French uniform? I'll have you jailed!"

"Wallah wallah! Okechobee," mum-

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bled Judley, whose sole purpose in life at that moment was to win his bet. "*Aroua bono,*" he added, endeavoring to slide past the sputtering corporal. "Umpah umpah!"

FOURMENT'S eyes grew rounder and rounder and rounder as he examined this strange, this unorthodox Arab, and all at once he exclaimed in a shocked voice:

"*Mon Dieu,* it is Judley!"

"Hell!" said Judley. "I lose."

"You are not going to desert!" protested Fourment, leaping to unwarranted conclusions. "Judley, I beg of you, you must not do it. Stop—now—before you take this fatal step. It means disgrace. It means prison!"

Locked in each other's arms in the shadowy depths of the side street Mercier and Van Horst cried tears of pure joy, but Judley was not even smiling. Fourment's shocked and superior manner grated on his nerves.

"Who said I was trying to desert?" he demanded.

"You cannot deceive me," Fourment informed him. "I have but to use my common sense."

"Use it on somebody else," Judley ordered truculently. "I'll do what I like. Get out of my way."

But Fourment did not choose to move. Not an inch. Gibraltar had nothing on the brave little corporal. It mattered a great deal to him what Judley did. He felt directly responsible for the good order and military discipline of the entire depot.

Very tactfully he had dropped a hint here and a word there until every officer at Sidi-bel-Abbes, from the colonel to the last joined subaltern, was aware of the tragic but meritorious case of Legionaire Lucien Fourment. He was so full of enthusiasm, so eager to do his duty, so uncomplaining and unassuming that his company commander had taken him under his wing, and instead of treating him as an ordinary recruit had assigned him almost at once to special duty with the corporals' training squad. Five weeks, to a day, after his enlistment he had been granted his stripes. It was a record. He was on his way to higher and better things with the least possible delay. Before long his poor-but-thrifty parents could be proud of their son again.

"Judley," he begged, standing in the deserter's path, "do not commit this folly. It is I who am guilty. I take all the blame. I desired to be with you and to assist you, but I have not had a minute to myself. I could have saved you from this demoralization. You are not accustomed to this virile environment, is it not? But one must do one's duty, even though for the present you feel lost. You must have courage . . ."

"You know me," Judley pointed out irrelevantly, "so you don't count. Now look: cut out that hot air. I got to go as far as the market square and back or I lose my bet. See what I mean—it's a bet. Horodinski's sitting on the photographer till I get back."

Fourment shook his head and sighed. He did not begin to understand what Judley meant.

"I cannot let you do it," he asserted. "It would be connivance. I would be betraying the trust my officers have placed in me. But I cannot forget that you saved my life. Take off those garments, Judley. Pull yourself together. We shall go back to barracks together!"

"Just listening to you makes me want to desert," Judley said wearily. "Once I was beaten up and locked in a

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cell because of your damned interference. That's more than enough. If I weren't feeling so good I'd crack you one right now."

THE case was hopeless, Fourment decided unhappily. Judley was determined to have his own way, which, of course, was absolutely out of the question. A corporal cannot stand by with folded arms while soldiers of the second class desert. It would spell the breakdown of all discipline, of the army itself.

"If I cannot appeal to you as a friend," he warned, "then I must remind you that you are speaking to your superior. I am a corporal and—"

"You're a blatherskite," Judley broke in. "Your stripes don't mean a thing to me."

Fourment drew himself up to his full height, clenching his fists, his eyes flashing.

"Must I place you under arrest to stop this stupidity?" he demanded. "Do not compel me to exert my authority. I desire only to help you, Judley. I wish to be your friend always. For your own sake I order you to take off that bournous. At once!"

Until that moment he had spoken in a conversational tone which had not attracted the attention of the people sauntering along the sidewalk beneath the trees, enjoying the cool night air. The lights were just dim enough to conceal the most outrageous details of Judley's costume, and the sight of a Legionaire talking to an Arab was too commonplace to be worth a second glance.

But as soon as Fourment, carried away by his sense of duty, raised his voice and began to shout about his authority, a crowd, hoping for the worst, surrounded the two men.

"A false beard," proclaimed a portly gentleman whose large belly was encased in a vest of white piqué.

"A false Arab!" cried a lady clinging to her husband's arm.

And the crowd, catching sight of Judley's uniform beneath the bournous, guffawed loudly.

Fourment was in his element. He was Justice tempered with Mercy, Stern Discipline struggling against the call of Friendship.

"Judley," he pleaded, speaking in French for the benefit of the grinning bystanders, "surely you must realize that this is hopeless. Be not so stubborn, my old one. You cannot desert. You are bringing shame and ridicule upon your regiment. I do not want to see you punished. Take off that bournous!"

Even then Judley did not lose his temper. His one ambition, since he had lost his bet, was to rejoin his gang, pay his debt, and go back to barracks. Fourment's epileptic behavior merely bored him. He was not at all anxious to see the inside of a cell again. At Fort St. Jean, bugs had eaten him alive.

"Don't froth at the mouth that way," he protested. "I keep telling you I'm not trying to desert. I'm going back to the photographer's and..."

Then a patrol of *gendarmes* came pounding down the road in double-quick time, and a lantern-jawed chief sergeant took command of the situation.

"What's the idea of that get-up?" he rasped. "What's the idea of creating a disturbance on the public highway? Drunk?"

"He was trying to desert," a voice cried from the crowd. "The corporal stopped him. He knocked the corporal down . . ."

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"So that's your game, is it?" barked the chief sergeant. "Hitting your superior officer . . . resisting arrest . . . attempting to desert! A fine specimen of a louse you are!"

Without warning he grabbed Judley's beard and yanked it off.

"That doesn't belong to me," Judley expostulated.

"Go easy with that beard. I'll have to pay for it."

Before he could move the chief sergeant caught hold of the bournous and tore it off his shoulders. He had left his tunic, belt and bayonet at the photographer's, a fact which added to the chief sergeant's fury.

"So that's it! Sold your uniform—swapped it for those filthy rags. You'll pay for this all right, don't you worry. Fall in four men and march this man to the guardhouse."

"If you'll let me explain—" Judley tried to say, but the chief sergeant silenced him.

"It'll keep, *salopard*. Tell it to the courtmartial."

JUDLEY, however, was lucky. He was not tried by courtmartial. The depot commandant, after investigating the case, decided to pass sentence himself. The charge of desertion had to be dropped. There were too many witnesses whose evidence corroborated Judley's story. But the list of offenses retained against him was quite long enough without that. He was accused of assault and battery upon the person of a civilian, to wit the photographer; theft and destruction of the said civilian's property; striking a superior officer (Corporal Fourment); refusing to obey an order; resisting arrest; using insubordinate language; and behavior prejudicial to good order and military discipline.

"This," said the depot commandant, "is your second offense and you have been in the Legion not quite six weeks. It is intolerable. But I shall give you one more chance because your victim, Corporal Fourment, has not lodged a formal complaint against you, although you attacked him without the slightest provocation. He has—er—enlightened me as to the very peculiar nature of your case" (the commandant tried to be impartial, but he found it hard to suppress his scorn for this ex-lounge lizard). "He thinks you are more to be pitied than blamed. Perhaps. And he has asked me to be lenient. Therefore, you will serve three months with the disciplinary battalion. They may be able to stiffen your backbone and drill some decency into you. Some manhood.

"If they can't, when you are returned to duty at this depot I shall make it my business to see that you are punished with exemplary severity."

It was a neat, well-rounded speech, but it had an unfortunate effect upon Judley. It made him madder than ever.

"When I come out, *mon commandant,*" he announced. "I'm going to break Corporal Fourment's neck if it's the last thing I do on earth. That's a promise. I didn't attack that louse. I wasn't trying to desert."

Standing like a ramrod among the witnesses, Fourment smiled a smile full of nobility and fortitude.

"He does not mean it, *mon commandant,*" he declared. "Some day he will understand."

"Nonsense!" snapped the officer. "This has gone too far. The man's an insubordinate scoundrel. Of all the ungrateful brutes I have ever met, this one is the worst. You'll serve four months instead of three," he told Jud-

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ley. "May that be a lesson to you. March him away!"

CHAPTER IV.

A HARD MAN.

LEGIONAIRE VINCENT JUDLEY, standing by the head of his cot, hooked up the collar of his second best tunic. It was dusk. A blast of superheated air streamed into the barrackroom through the wide open window. Men lay stark naked and panting on their beds, too exhausted to move after a long day on the drill ground.

The trooper on the cot next to Judley's propped himself up on one elbow and watched him wind the woolen cummerbund around his waist.

"Need any help?'" he inquired.

Judley's only answer was a grunt. Four months with the disciplinary battalion had completely altered his appearance. Lean-jawed and sinewy, burned black by the sun, the last trace of softness had been sweated out of him. Iron seemed to have bitten into his soul. His eyes were bleak, his mouth drawn at tight as a string.

"Going out?" his neighbor went on.

"What's it to you?" retorted Judley, buckling his leather belt over the cummerbund.

The man grinned and flopped over onto his back.

"Not a thing! Absolutely not a thing. If you want to go out in this heat, I'm not going to stop you!"

"Wait till you've cracked stones twelve hours a day at Ras-el-Horta," Judley drawled out of the corner of his mouth, "then you'll find out what it's like to be hot. This ain't nothing."

"They treated you rough up there, did they?"

Judley looked at the man — looked and said nothing. Then he took his cap off the top of his kit stacked on the shelf at the head of his bed, wiped the patent leather vizor on his cuff, and wedged the cap on his head. He swung out of the room and went clattering down the flight of stone steps worn hollow by the hobnailed boots of generations of Legionaires. Cutting across the courtyard he made a bee-line for the regimental office.

Two clerks, their day's work done, were tidying up their desks.

"Fourment?" one of them said in answer to Judley's question. "Do you mean Sergeant Lucien Fourment?"

"He was a corporal four months ago."

Both clerks laughed sarcastically and their spokesman said:

"Four months is a long time to a bird like your friend Fourment. He's a smooth worker."

"I don't get you."

"It's this way. Some men are promoted because they deserve it, and some because they're too dumb to duck when they're under fire, but Fourment, he's got a brand new wheeze. He's been kicked upstairs because he never keeps his mouth shut. Talk! You ought to know; duty, honor, discipline, obedience. All that stuff."

"Still at it, is he?"

"And going strong. You might think he'd swallowed the *Règlement*, cover and all. Officers lap it up. He's an Inspiration, see what I mean?"

"Where do I find this Inspiration?"

"Probably hobnobbing with his company commander or having tea with the colonel's wife. He never speaks to anybody below the rank of adjutant. Not him! He wouldn't even *see* you nowadays."

"Naw?" commented Judley. "I'll

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take care of that. Thanks for the information."

Abruptly he turned on his heels and left the office. Outside it was almost dark. He glanced at the brightly lighted windows of the canteen, but he had no money and no hope of borrowing any, for the Legionaires he had associated with had been shifted to active service units while he had been cracking stones at Ras-el-Horta. No money—no drinks at the canteen. He sauntered out of the barracks, mingling with the stream of soldiers moving at a leisurely pace down the avenue toward the center of the town.

HE had not gone far, however, when a civilian—a staid and respectable-looking Frenchman, with a neat gray beard and a pince-nez, stepped up to him, removed his Panama hat which had evidently cost several hundred francs, and said in a brisk, pleasant voice:

"Pardon me, but I have the honor, I believe, of addressing myself to Monsieur Vincent Judley, is it not?"

Judley was too flabbergasted to say anything. Civilians, he had learned, are very squeamish when it comes to dealing at close quarters with the rank and file of the Foreign Legion. They look upon Legionaires as unmitigated rascals; excellent cannon fodder, no doubt; heroic scoundrels who, unfortunately, are not fit to be touched with a pair of tongs from a social standpoint. They drink to excess, they fight, their morals are deplorable, they would steal the pennies off a dead man's eyes. In fine, a Legionaire is mud except when he is on the firing line making a vast colonial empire safe for bankers and mining syndicates.

The Legionaire is fully aware of this feeling, but he does not give a single damn. He is outspokenly contemptuous of all white-collared civilians and asks nothing but to be left alone.

That a civilian should take off his hat when speaking to a soldier was an unheard of occurrence. Judley was feeling mean and sour, but the sight of that uncovered gray pate somehow tickled his fancy.

"Judley," he nodded. "That's me. But who the devil..."

"Precisely," smiled the man. "Allow me to introduce myself." He held out an engraved card, but the light was so bad that the printed characters were scarcely visible and he added, "I am Aristide Bellanger, at your service, *monsieur*. I am delighted to make your acquaintance, *monsieur*. Hearing that you had returned to the barracks yesterday morning, I waited last night hoping to have the pleasure of greeting you then, but you did not appear."

Judley was so unaccustomed to such mellifluous language that he felt dizzy. He was used to blistering curses, threats, and orders accompanied by blasphemous references to his parentage.

"I don't know you from a bunch of beets," he pointed out. "What's on your mind?"

Bellanger placed a finger over his bewhiskered lips.

"I must ask you to be patient. I cannot at present reveal to you the sources of my information. I have found you, that must suffice. If you will accompany me all your questions will receive an immediate and satisfactory answer. More, *monsieur*, I cannot say. My instructions are formal."

Judley shook his head. "Nothing doing. I don't give a curse whether you answer my questions or not. It's

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all one to me. If that doesn't suit you—good night."

He spoke with brutal forthrightness, but Bellanger, instead of taking offense, became more sympathetic than ever.

"It is easy to see that you have suffered greatly," he observed. "Prison has left its imprint upon you."

"Who said I'd been in prison?" Judley retorted. "That's the trouble with civilians—you don't know the difference between a disciplinary battalion and a prison. The disciplinary battalion is—"

"It must have been a trying experience, I am sure."

"Who says so?" Judley came back at him wrathfully. "And anyway, what's it to you? Get down to business or get out of my way—one of the two."

BELLANGER ran his fingers through his beard, raised one eyebrow, and smiled knowingly.

"To be explicit, *monsieur,* a lady who has heard of your predicament, a lady who esteems you highly, asks you to dine with her this evening. She is very eager to meet you."

"A *lady* wants to have dinner with *me?*" Judley inquired suspiciously. "Say, are you trying to kid?" A thought flashed through his mind. "Wait!" he exclaimed, grabbing Bellanger by the shoulders. "Don't tell me it's Mrs. Krepping? I mean Mrs. Judley. Is that who it is?"

"Our client insisted upon the utmost discretion," Bellanger protested. "She will never forgive me if she finds out that I have forewarned you. Our agency is . . ."

". . . the highest priced agency in the world, bet you a dime," laughed Judley. "She never buys anything but the best. All right," he went on, linking arms with Bellanger. "I'll go with you. I'd like to see her again . . . for a couple of minutes."

Bellanger's spirits revived as they hurried down the avenue.

"You have changed greatly, *monsieur,* if I may say so," he commented with a dry chuckle. "The pictures placed at my disposal by our client fail to—to do you justice."

"For a detective you've got quite a sense of humor," Judley observed. "I'll say I've changed, inside and out."

"*Monsieur* is a philosopher!"

"*Monsieur* craves a drink," said Judley.

A dingy café confronted them. Judley marched his companion up to the bar and called for two liters of white wine.

"Not for me," protested Bellanger. "I never drink. Not on duty. I will have a glass of Vichy water."

"You're excused," agreed Judley. "I'll drink both bottles of wine . . . and you'll pay for 'em. Put 'em on your expense account. I'm broke."

Monsieur Bellanger was one of the most astute private detectives in France. He specialized in delicate missions for moneyed people. He had a great deal of experience, but he had never before come in contact with a Legionaire fresh from the iron-bound hell of the Disciplinary Battalion. It was unexpected and appalling.

According to Mrs. Judley's description he had been expecting to find a bruised, crushed and repentant young man, who would ask for nothing better than the privilege of being kidnaped by his wife and wafted out of Africa on board a specially chartered airplane.

But Judley met none of these specifications. He was about the most casual and case-hardened individual

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Bellanger had ever come across. Neither crushed nor repentant, he appeared to thrive on hard knocks. And could he drink! Four bottles of iced white wine slid down his gullet before he hitched up his belt and said:

"Much obliged, my old one. Let's go find Louisa."

"*Madame* is staying at the Hotel Continentale."

"That's out of bounds to the rank and file," Judley pointed out, but Bellanger merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Arrangements have been made," he said blandly. "We shall enter by the service door, if you do not object. *Madame* is expecting you in one of the private dining rooms. Nothing can go wrong, I assure you."

Notwithstanding this assurance, something did go very wrong indeed while they were tiptoeing down the threadbare carpet past the private rooms where the officers of Sidi-bel-Abbes make discreet whoopee.

THE headwaiter, who led the way, stopped outside Room 5A. He nodded. Bellanger nodded and crooked his forefinger, ready to knock.

"We have arrived," he whispered. "I leave you for the present. You are to go in alone."

"Don't leave me," grinned Judley. "I'm scared . . ."

And at that moment a door opened on the opposite side of the corridor, and out popped a young lieutenant, followed by a smartly uniformed sergeant with a large cigar in his mouth.

Bellanger was rap-rap-rapping on the door of 5A.

"Come in!" cried a muffled voice.

"Now," said Bellanger, clutching Judley's elbow.

But Judley hung back. Judley balked. Over the heads of his companions, who were trying to shield him from view, he was staring straight into the eyes of Sergeant Lucien Fourment, and the look on his harsh, angular face filled Bellanger with dismay.

"Come in!" repeated the muffled voice.

"She awaits you," pleaded Bellanger. "Do not delay!"

"Let go my arm," Judley ordered. "Quick!"

Bellanger did as he was told, and immediately afterward hell broke loose.

Fourment took the cigar from between his teeth and cried:

"Judley . . . my poor Judley . . . out of bounds!"

The officer exclaimed: "What is this private doing in here, *maître-d'hôtel?* I'll hold you responsible for this."

The door of 5A flew open and Mrs. Krepping-Judley, gowned to perfection, alluring and desirable, stood on the threshold. She caught a glimpse of her husband's demolished profile and wailed:

"Vincent . . . No, it can't be . . . It's not Vincent! This is too terrible!"

The combined efforts of Bellanger and the head waiter drove Judley into the room. The door closed. They stood face to face, alone, and in that split second Mrs. Judley's womanly intuition told her that she had been wasting her time and her money for many months past. This rough, unlovely creature had nothing in common with the youthful, handsome, diffident Vincent she had been crazy about. Even the look in his eyes had changed. He was laughing at her, and there was something so cold-blooded about this silent, tight-lipped laughter that it made her shudder.

"I ought not to have come," she gasped.

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"That's the truth," he admitted. "This is no place for you. It's just too bad."

His voice was rough, and his breath was tainted with the smell of cheap wine. It was a ghastly situation, Mrs. Judley decided, and she felt very sorry for herself.

Meanwhile the noise in the corridor was growing louder and more purposeful. Doors slammed and banged. Some one shouted:

"There are no exceptions. He must be arrested!"

"They're talking about me," Judley explained. "I'm out of bounds. We're all washed up, Louisa. I wouldn't go back if I could. Get a divorce—the sooner the quicker."

"Your poor nose!" she exclaimed.

"The guy who did that went to hospital with his jaw shoved up around his ear," he informed her with a cheerful wink. "I slugged him with a piece of lead pipe."

Bracing herself against the supper table, she threw back her head with haughty disdain. She loathed this man. He had the manners and the appearance of a gangster. And she had been forced to come all the way to Sidi-bel-Abbes in midsummer to find this out.

"I think you are abominable," she said icily.

"Maybe," he admitted, "and the funny part of it all is that I'm satisfied. You're all right, Louisa, but your way of living and mine they don't gee. That's why I walked out on you."

"We need not go into details," snapped his wife. "Your contemptible behavior is in keeping with—"

HE never found out what his behavior was in keeping with, for the door was suddenly thrown wide open and several indignant men burst into the room. Bellanger and the head waiter came in backward. They were swept aside. The lieutenant who had been dining with Fourment confronted Judley. Fourment himself, slightly flushed with food and wine, hovered in the background, his lustrous eyes darting from Mrs. Judley's jewels to the champagne bucket, and on to Judley's malevolent face.

"*Madame,*" said the lieutenant, "I apologize for this intrusion, but my duty compels me to order this man to leave the hotel at once. No private soldiers are allowed on the premises."

"I am not detaining him," Mrs. Judley declared.

The officer motioned toward the door and said "*Partez!*" in a stern, parade-ground voice. But Judley refused to depart.

"I was invited to dinner," he announced, "and I'm staying to dinner. I'm hungry."

"Most certainly not!" said his wife. "You may go."

"Go!" repeated the officer. "At once!"

Judley might have obeyed this order if Fourment had not seen fit to butt in just for the sake of making a favorable impression upon the lady, whose jewelry was worth, he estimated, at the least half a million francs.

"Judley," he said earnestly, "we are friends, is it not? From the very first I have done my best to help you. Lieutenant Vitelmente will forgive me if I speak to you not as a sergeant but as man to man. I know how hard it is for you to learn the meaning of obedience and discipline. But your duty to your regiment comes first! You must go away quietly—for your own sake. Surely, you do not wish to get into any more trouble. Another time I could not save you!"

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He uttered these platitudes with such an accent of sincerity that Mrs. Judley, though she was very much upset, could not but admire his quiet courage and well chosen words. Here, she felt, was a true soldier, brave, gentlemanly and gallant.

And while these thoughts took shape in her mind, Legionaire Judley rasped:

"As man to man, Fourment, I ought to flatten you out. That's what I set out to do to-night—but you ain't worth hitting. You're a joke."

"*Assez!* That will do," snapped Lieutenant Vitelmente. "Remember who you are talking to. Keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"You must not argue," added Fourment. "No one wants to see you go back to the disciplinary battalion."

Judley turned white.

"They don't have squirts like you up there," he began threateningly.

"I have done all in my power to help you," Fourment cried with such a wealth of emotion that Mrs. Judley's eyelids fluttered ecstatically. "If you will not be reasonable do not blame me later on!"

It was as good as a show. Mrs. Judley had never been quite so thrilled in all her life.

"Don't you ever mind your own damn business?" retorted Judley.

"It is my business to see that the law is obeyed. The Legion—"

"Yeah! If you weren't in it the Legion wouldn't be so bad. You're worse than the seven-days itch. Quit blathering about your duty and your honor before I lose my temper and bust you one, you cheap little crook."

HE had not the slightest intention of striking Fourment—not just then, not before so many witnesses — but his attitude was so menacing that Lieutenant Vitelmente sprang forward, shielding Fourment with the gold braid on his cuffs. Judley stepped back to avoid the officer. In so doing his heel came down on Mrs. Judley's bunion. The pain was so excruciating that she let out a shrill scream and thrust against his broad back with both hands and all her might.

Caught off balance, he lurched heavily against the officer. Locked in each other's arms they one-stepped across the room. A great shout went up. Judley had attacked the officer and was about to murder him!

"Stop!" yelled Fourment. "Stop, Judley. This, I warn you, means prison!"

But Judley could not stop. At every step either he trod on the lieutenant's toes, or the lieutenant tripped him up. Their legs were tied up in knots. They did not stop until they struck a chair and went sprawling.

Judley came up on top, the lieutenant underneath. His death appeared to be imminent, but Fourment dashed to the rescue. Grabbing a cut glass decanter off the table, he brought it down on the top of Judley's head.

Judley pitched forward and lay still, drenched in the high priced sherry which was to have accompanied the hors d'œuvres he never ate.

And while the regimental surgeon was picking bits of glass out of his scalp in the operating room at the hospital, Sergeant Fourment and Lieutenant Vitelmente stayed very considerately with Mrs. Judley until she recovered her composure and her poise.

"What," she inquired, yearning toward the sergeant, "what will they do to him, do you suppose?"

"His is a sad case, *madame*," sighed Fourment. "He struck an officer. It

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is a very serious offence. I am afraid the lightest sentence he can expect will be a year at hard labor."

"Two years would be nearer the mark," added Vitelmente.

"Ah, well," Mrs. Judley said brightly, "perhaps it is all for the best. He didn't have to come here since the hotel is out of bounds. He could have sent word, couldn't he? But I'm quite sure I want nothing more to do with him."

"A wise decision," agreed Fourment. "He was not capable of understanding a woman of your finesse, *madame*—a woman endowed with your delicacy of emotion. He was, shall we say, too coarse fibered, yes?"

"Yes," admitted Mrs. Judley.

Their eyes met. They smiled.

"Such rings!" thought Fourment. "He was not lying when he said she was wealthy. She must be worth a fortune!"

And he smiled at her all over again.

CHAPTER V.

CHARGE!

FOR the twentieth time Lieutenant Fourment slid back his cuff and peered at the glowing dial of his wrist watch. The watch, a present from Mrs. Krepping-Judley, had cost a lot of money. The dial shone like a lighthouse. It was so bright that it made him wince with acute discomfort. The hour was twenty minutes past four in the morning. The night was still pitch dark, but it seemed to him that the stars were not quite as bright as they had been a few moments earlier.

He shuddered inside his thin khaki tunic and bit down on his lower lip to stop the chattering of his teeth. He was bitterly cold, cold to the very marrow of his bones, and his heart thumped like lead against his ribs.

Behind him fifty Legionaires sprawled on the sunbaked, dusty soil. The morning was so quiet, so very still, that the sound of the men's breathing and the faint creakings of their leather trappings grated loud and clear in his ears. Away at the end of the line two of the troopers were talking in a hushed whisper. He would have given a year's pay to silence them, but he dare not move or speak. It was as though he had been nailed to the ground.

In a little while he was to lead his half company up the hill rising directly in front of him—a black mass against the sky—drive the Ait Hassour out of their stronghold along the crest, and hold the position while the rest of the column swept the enemy out of his defences around the Bab el Akoudah well.

The column, five hundred strong, had struck a snag. Shots had greeted the advance guard as it neared the well late the previous afternoon after a forty-five kilometer march across a shadowless, sun-plastered wilderness of sand and rock.

The men's water bottles were bone dry—had been dry for hours. Their lips were black and swollen with thirst, their throats on fire. No water carts accompanied the column, which was traveling light and fast. Eager to reach the well, the advance guard had pressed on . . . and had blundered into a tremendous blast of fire which had compelled it to retire and wait for the arrival of the main body of troops.

Even then Commandant Maricourt, the column leader, had underestimated the strength of his opponents. He had thrown the two leading companies into

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action as soon as they came up; and they had been cut to ribbons when the Ait Hassour, perched among the rocks on the hillside above the well, had poured lead into the right flank and flattened it out as though it had been stamped into the ground.

Darkness had added to the confusion. There had been a very nasty hand to hand scuffle along the outskirts of the oasis, and in the end the two companies, badly mauled and exhausted, had been forced to fall back, leaving the dead behind to be hacked to pieces and befouled by the tribesmen.

Maricourt had not slept that night. He knew that he must reach the well at break of day or perish. The Ain Hassour knew it too. If they could hold their ground for a few hours, till mid-afternoon, the French soldiers would be at their mercy. Thirst and the flaming sun were dependable, terrible allies, a match for the best troops in the world.

The commandant had laid his plans with great care. To Fourment and his fifty men had been entrusted the mission of clearing the heights above the well. Fourment had been specially selected for the task because of his reputation for unswerving devotion to duty. He had never been under fire before, but his reputation was so great that every one had the greatest admiration for his courage. He had been sent forward at three o'clock in the morning with orders to crawl as close as possible to the rocky hillside springing almost sheer-walled out of the floor of the plain.

A bugle call was to send him on his way, and while his section was overrunning the hill, Maricourt was going to thrust at the oasis with every man he could muster.

"You cannot fail," he told Fourment before sending him to his post. "If you do we're lost. We're going to lose heavily no matter how fast we move, but unless you reach your goal we shan't be able to hold the well five minutes. I don't have to tell you what that means."

"Depend upon me, *mon commandant,*" Fourment promised solemnly, though his chest felt as empty as a bottomless pit, and his knees twitched jerkily. "I shall do my utmost!"

"I know it," said Maricourt. "Work fast. Don't give 'em a chance to react. Smash 'em!"

"I shall do so!" agreed Fourment, licking his parched lips.

Maricourt laid a hand on his shoulder.

"That's how I like to hear 'em talk. Splendid, my boy! Your bride will have good cause to be proud of you next month when you march up to the altar. She could not have picked a better man. Good luck to you, my boy. And don't forget . . . smash 'em. Don't waste a second."

BUT Fourment, as he lay in the dust on the open plain watching the graying sky, felt neither brave, nor splendid, nor dependable. All the fine and noble sentiments which he had expressed so freely had lost all meaning. He was afraid, sickeningly afraid of the fate that lay in store for him on the hillslope rising black and silent against the stars.

He did not want to die. The thought appalled him. Now, as never before, he wanted to live. For he had accomplished what he had set out to do. He had staged a spectacular comeback. The misstep for which he had been cashiered and sent to prison was forgiven and forgotten. Corporal, sergeant, lieutenant; he had talked him-

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self up every rung of the ladder and—most marvelous of all rewards—he had won the heart of an immensely wealthy American, none other than Mrs. Krepping-Judley.

Theirs had been a beautiful, sentimental courtship which had lasted a year and a half. In the interim she had secured a divorce and was now ready to marry her bold lieutenant. She awaited him in Paris. He was to join her there as soon as the column returned to the base and the Minister of War approved his resignation. He loved the army, but he loved Mrs. Judley's money even more, and she had stipulated that, to win her, he would have to leave the Legion. She simply could not stand the strain, although the two years he had spent in Africa had been blissfully calm and uneventful.

And now, confound the luck—now at the last second, when luxury, comfort, security and the love of a wonderful woman lay within measurable grasp—he was being called upon to sacrifice his life in an unimportant border scuffle which, if mentioned at all, would not receive three lines of type in the Paris papers.

The Legion, the army, pride of empire, duty and self-sacrifice were empty words. Terror bit into his soul as he saw the gray tinge along the horizon creep upward and grow brighter. Day was coming. A matter of minutes. The stars lost their luster.

His men were growing restless. They fidgeted; their belts creaked; their boots squeaked; they snuffled. He was certain that the Ait Hassour were aware of his presence. From the hillside a thousand pairs of eyes seemed to be peering at him, and a thousand fingers were crooked around a thousand triggers, waiting to blast him off the face of the earth at the first streak of light.

The sky now was a silvery gray, and the jagged peaks of a mountain range along the rim of the eastern horizon were tipped with saffron and scarlet. But the floor of the plain was still bathed in darkness when Fourment heard the muffled tread of hobnailed boots, and he knew that the rest of the column was on the move, lining up for the attack.

It was making enough noise to wake the dead. It aroused the Ain Hassour. Stray shots rang out sharply. They came, God be praised, from the oasis. On the hillside there was not a sound. A crazy hope buoyed him up: perhaps the Ait Hassour had abandoned their position and had concentrated all their forces around the well.

The sky behind the mountain range throbbed with light. The crest of the hill took shape. Rock masses carved into strange shapes by the action of wind and sand and sun sprang up before Fourment's wide, unwinking eyes. His dry mouth grew drier as he waited, gripping his revolver till his fingers ached.

The light seeped down the slope and the shadows melted. Heaving himself to his knees he whispered to his Legionaires:

"Not a sound. Be careful . . . Stand by . . ."

And all the while he was thinking of Mrs. Louisa Judley, waiting for him in Paris.

Another long minute dragged by. Maricourt's troops were making a dreadful clatter to draw the enemy's fire away from Fourment's party. There was a great deal of needless shouting, whistles blew, and some of the men seemed to be rattling their tin mess plates against their scabbards.

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Instead of being comforted by these noises, Fourment became panic-stricken. Beads of perspiration oozed out of the tightly drawn skin on his forehead. He had at least two hundred yards to go to reach the first bowlders. Two hundred yards without a scrap of cover. It was murder. He felt horribly soft and defenseless.

"I think," he began, speaking over his shoulder to his senior sergeant, "perhaps we ought to move in closer . . ."

A BUGLE call, high and clear and brassy, blew the words from his lips. And everything went wrong. As he sprang to his feet he tripped and fell, losing at least a second. His men were on top of him, running like deer, before he could scramble out of the dust.

"*En avant!*" he shouted. "Forward!"

But it was all he could do to keep abreast of the Legionaires as they raced, yelling, toward the slope. It towered above him, seeming to grow higher and steeper and yet higher till it filled the blood-red, flaming sky.

Midway. His men panted as they pounded along. Another fifty meters to go . . . another twenty. Then came the bullets, streaking past his head, thudding in the sunbaked earth at his feet. A Legionaire hurled a hand grenade at some natives running across the open. As he did so he collapsed, drilled through the stomach. The grenade burst among the Arabs, whirling them skyward in the midst of a geyser-like spout of dirt and smoke. A platoon sergeant went sprawling. All along the line men were being cut down. The hillside roared.

Fourment plunged on, hunching his shoulders around his ears, too exhausted to see or hear or breathe. The rending crash of hand grenades made his brain reel. His men, out of hand, each trooper fighting his own battle, were swarming up the slope, bayoneting their opponents, bombing them, beating out their brains with their gun butts. A slug nicked Fourment's ear lobe. He bled like a stuck pig. His shoulder and chest grew sticky.

"Stop!" he yelled, and his mouth seemed to be full of mush. "For God's sake, stop! I've been hit..."

It could not go on. Not in that chaotic fashion. The section was being butchered piecemeal. There were great gaps between the ranks, gaps so wide that all semblance of cohesion had disappeared. Natives were popping up behind the ragged line, shooting the troopers in the back.

Fourment saw all these things through a blurred mist of sweat and fear.

"Stop!" he shouted, ducking behind a bowlder. "Take cover! Form up . . . close up!"

But he knew that he was lying when he tried to make himself believe that he was endeavoring to save his men from annihilation. What he really wanted to do was to save his own hide, to lie down and hug the earth, and make himself small until the storm of lead subsided.

Fear is more contagious than measles, more deadly than black cholera. First one man, then another and another saw Fourment take shelter behind the bowlders; they became aware of his shrill, unsteady voice crying to them to stop. In an instant they grew conscious of the risks they ran, of their weariness and thirst, of the bullets drumming upon the rocks all about them, of the distance they still had to cover to reach the crest.

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The headlong scramble, which had almost driven the Ain Hassour from their stronghold, came to an abrupt end. Like sheep the Legionaires huddled around Fourment, crouching low, hiding from the very men they had been about to defeat.

Not ten minutes had elapsed since the bugle call had sent them into action. It was broad daylight. The sun had not yet cleared the mountain peaks along the horizon.

CHAPTER VI.

JAWS OF DEATH.

"THEY'VE stopped," said Commandant Maricourt, reining in his horse.

"I am afraid they have," conceded his staff captain.

"Good Lord!" said Maricourt, watching the long lines of men marching toward the oasis.

The hillock where Fourment's men were hung up was veiled in a haze of blue smoke. The noise of rifle fire rolled across the plain, rising and falling and rising again to a sullen roar.

"Fourment must have been put out of action," suggested the staff captain. He found it difficult to speak, for his tongue was so swollen that it stuck to his palate.

"Probably," nodded Maricourt. "In fact, of course. But, damn it, there must be somebody in command . . . I told him not to stop until he reached the crest. He must have told his subordinates. Confound the blackguards!"

He struck the pommel of his saddle with his clenched fist, and a second later exclaimed:

"They're falling back!"

"Too bad," admitted the staff captain.

"We can't reinforce them now," snapped Maricourt. "Too late. They'll have to go on. Where's a messenger? Get me a messenger! No, wait—I'll pick one out."

He wheeled his jaded horse around and urged it toward the spot, fifty yards away, where a signal sergeant and half a dozen dispatch carriers squatted beside a string of tethered mules.

The men sprang to their feet as he drew near. At first glance they looked all alike. Unwashed, unshaved, crusted with sweat-streaked dust, their lean faces were as closed and unemotional as so many masks. But one man at the tail end of the line attracted Maricourt's attention; an angular, raw-boned trooper with a broken nose and an unexpected glimmer in his eyes as though he were secretly amused by the commandant's perturbation.

A more unprepossessing customer would have been hard to find. Latent insubordination was stamped upon his countenance. The tilt of his disreputable cap dragged down over one ear was an insult in itself. Though the sergeant glared at him he went on noisily sucking a pebble with bored unconcern.

Maricourt, however, had not been with the colonial army for fifteen odd years without learning a few things about Legionaires. They were a breed apart. For certain jobs the tougher they were the more they could be depended upon.

He pounced upon the soldier and barked at him:

"What's your name?"

The Legionaire spoke out of the corner of his mouth:

"93,775, Judley, Vincent, *mon commandant.*"

"Service?"

"Two years and three months."

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"Of which," chimed in the sergeant, strangling with rage, "of which, *mon commandant,* he has spent a year and a month in prison and four months with the disciplinary battalion. He is not a trustworthy man, *mon commandant,* if I may say so. He has given me more trouble—"

"Quite," snapped Maricourt. "That can wait. Look here, Judley, there's work for you to do."

ONE of Judley's eyebrows went up, the other went down. He looked abused and sardonic. Maricourt nodded approvingly. Any man with gall enough to adopt such an expression when spoken to by his commanding officer ought to have more than enough nerve to face the enemy's fire without faltering.

"Our flank attack has been held up," Maricourt went on. "Go find out who's in charge. Tell 'em go attack again at once. *At once,* mind you."

He scrawled a note on a pad he drew from his saddle bag, tore it off, and handed it to Judley.

It was addressed to Lieutenant Lucien Fourment. The message said simply:

> You have had no orders to retire. Attack immediately until all objectives carried.
>
> CMDT. A. MARICOURT.

Judley's eyes flew wide open.

"Is Lieutenant Fourment up there?" he said sharply.

"He *was,*" retorted Maricourt. "On your way, Legionaire! As fast as you can."

Judley saluted, grinned at the commandant, crammed the paper into his breast pocket and hurried away at a smart jog-trot, trailing his rifle at the end of his arm.

For months on end—in prison and out—he had been waiting for this minute to come, waiting for a chance to meet Fourment and drive two feet of steel through his gizzard. He had suffered too much ever to forget or forgive Fourment. After his release he had worked and schemed to obtain his transfer to the same battalion as the lieutenant. In the end he had succeeded, but he had been kept so busy that he had not had a chance to rout out his *bête noire.*

On the line of march he was always at the tail end of the column when Fourment was up front. Even after he had been assigned to headquarters staff as a dispatch bearer, because of his long legs, not once had he been sent with a message to Fourment's company.

"Wouldn't you know it?" he muttered to himself. "It's a thousand to one shot he's been croaked. Damn the luck!"

Above the uproar, close to his ear, a slug went by with a thin, wailing sound. It made the hair bristle on the nape of his neck. The sound came again, so shrill and menacing that instinctively he ducked his head and broke into a shuffling run. It was the first time he had been under fire. For no accountable reason it angered him, and he scowled fiercely at the blazing hillside, hunting for some sign of the baboons who were using him as a target.

But he could not see a thing. There was too much dust and smoke. The sunlight was too dazzling in his smarting eyes.

Fourment's section, however, was not difficult to locate. All he had to do was to follow the trail of casualties the section had left in its wake. Here and there a wounded man cried out as

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he went by, but he did not stop. That bullet-swept plain was no place to linger long. He went on, cursing because he could not make his legs go faster.

A slug grazed the inside of his left arm, another whipped his cap off his head, exposing his close-cropped skull to the full blast of the sun. Blood trickled down his face from a gash above his eye.

Panting, swearing, puffing like an asthmatic cab horse, he reached the shelter of the rocks.

GRAY faces swam before his eyes. There was something wrong with those faces. They looked flaccid. They twitched and quivered with fear.

"Who," he gurgled, "is in command of this lousy outfit?"

Slugs tore jagged fragments off the bowlders, sent them spinning through the air.

"Nobody's in charge," mumbled a trooper. "We're licked. At the first rush we'll be swamped."

"Who says so?" snarled Judley. "Isn't there a sergeant or a corporal or somebody? I got a message."

The man laughed jerkily.

"Message, huh? Take it to the lieutenant. Over yonder on the left, sniveling his damned head off."

Judley caught the trooper by the throat and shook him.

"The lieutenant?" he shouted. "Is he still alive? Why the blue, flaming blazes didn't you say so sooner?"

On hands and knees he crawled along over corpses stiffly twisted among the stones, past sullen, apathetic troopers who returned the enemy fire without bothering to take aim. And at last he came upon Fourment, whimpering and helpless, stripped of all pride, decency and self-control. In private life he would have been said to be suffering from a nervous breakdown, but in the Legion nervous breakdowns are unknown. When they occur they are called a much uglier name than that.

Judley nudged the lieutenant in the ribs.

"Message from the commandant, *mon lieutenant,*" he sang out.

Fourment half turned, snatched the paper from the messenger's hand, read it and, as an afterthought, looked up. His lower jaw sagged down, then he yelped:

"Judley!"

It was as though he had seen a ghost.

"That's right," agreed the ghost. "That message says what the hell you waiting for?"

"My God, Judley!" repeated Fourment, clawing convulsively at the collar of his tunic.

He was so abject that Judley's hate changed to disgust. The sight of this quivering, tear-stained creature filled him with unholy delight, repaid him full measure for the years of misery and suffering. This in itself was revenge enough.

And it dawned upon him that the grudge he had nursed for so many months was so old and moth-eaten that it no longer mattered.

"Quit bellyaching and shut up," he ordered. "That message says go on. What are you going to do about it?"

"We can't go on," choked Fourment. "Half my men have been killed, and—"

Contemptuously Judley smacked him across the mouth, knocking him to his knees.

"A swell Legionaire you are," he observed. "A swell officer! You ain't fit to lead a section of polecats."

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Fourment tried to stand up. Judley clouted him brutally full in the face, shouting:

"Keep out of this. You've gummed up the works once—that's plenty. I'll show you how it's done since you haven't the guts to do it yourself."

He wheeled upon the goggle-eyed Legionaires and barked at them:

"What are you waiting for? We got our orders, ain't we? Come on—let's be moving!"

He did not give them a chance to think. The punch he had landed on Fourment's jaw seemed to have broken the evil spell that held them back. They needed a leader. Judley was the right man in the right place for once in his life.

HALF a dozen men followed him as he sprang to his feet and heaved a hand grenade straight before him. He was on his way, clawing his way up the slope, before the débris of the explosion subsided Behind that first handful came the others—twenty-nine all told. But there was no stopping them. Up they went, shoulder to shoulder, hard on Judley's heels.

In quick succession he was hit three times, dull, thumping blows that made him lurch unsteadily. When he tried to shout his throat was full of blood, but he drove on, pumping lead into the backs of the dim figures scurrying among the rocks.

Abruptly he stood on the crest and looked down upon the treetops and the round white dome of the well. Closer at hand he saw men swarming up toward him.

A volley of hand grenades blotted them out.

He tried to motion the Legionaires forward, but his arm was as heavy as lead. His knees gave way and he rolled over onto his face.

"DURING the engagement at the Bab-el-Akoudah well on the 15th of September, Legionaire Judley, bearing a dispatch from the column commander to the officer in charge of the Right Section of the 4th Company, found the section demoralized and unable to make headway against the enemy's murderous fire.

"Acting upon his own initiative, Legionaire Judley took command of the section, and though severely wounded, led it forward until it had reached all its objectives."

The colonel cleared his throat and glanced over the edge of the paper he was reading as the sick man stretched out limp and still beneath the tightly drawn coverlet on the hospital cot.

The sick man, a queer smile on his lips, stared straight up at the ceiling.

"Legionaire Judley's courage," the colonel went on, "his sense of duty, his unswerving devotion and high sense of discipline deserve the highest praise. In consequence whereof, on the recommendation of Commandant Maricourt, the Minister of War has seen fit to bestow upon Legionaire Judley the Military Medal."

With due ceremony he pinned the medal on Judley's nightgown and kissed him on both cheeks.

Judley said nothing. He seemed absorbed in the contemplation of a fly crawling on the ceiling. The group of officers sighed, shook their gold-braided caps, and left the ward on tiptoe. A Sister of Mercy accompanied them as far as the door, then hurried back with a thermometer in her hand.

"After all that excitement," she said, bending over him, "we might as well take your temperature."

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Judley relaxed, grinning at her.

"I'm all right," he whispered. "I'm fine."

Her face grew hard, although a glimmer of amusement persisted in her eyes.

"Why did you behave so rudely?" she demanded. "Why didn't you thank the colonel?"

"All that hot air about doing my duty," he explained, "it always gives me a severe pain in the neck. That's why."

"You were very bad," she informed him. "I am ashamed of you. That is no way for a brave soldier to talk or to act. Now open your mouth and put the thermometer beneath your tongue."

He shook his head.

"I want to know something, or I'll bite your thermometer in two, Sister, and swallow it. Have you heard what happened to Lieutenant Fourment?"

"Sssh! You must not bother about such things."

"No? Well, look here, either you tell me now or I'll pull off my bandages and pick out the stitches. It's up to you."

She put a hand on his shoulder and held him down. It was an extraordinarily firm and capable hand. He lay still.

"Lieutenant Fourment," she said after a while, "was found guilty of cowardice in the face of the enemy." She bowed her head, crossed herself, and added gently, "He died this morning."

Judley tried to look sad, but the effort was not a great success.

"You know somebody who's going to be disappointed?" he inquired. "You'll be surprised. It's my wife. She was going to marry him, so I heard. It's a positive fact. My ex-wife, you know."

She caught hold of his wrist and felt his epulse.

It was weak and fast.

"Put this thermometer under your tongue," she ordered. "You have talked enough. Are you or are you not going to behave properly?"

"From now on," promised Judley, "I'll walk a chalk line. There ain't nobody left to tell me how to do my duty. He . . . glub!"

The nun had shoved the glass tube into his mouth.

"Beneath the tongue," she repeated. "Close your lips, if you please, my infant—tight."

THE END

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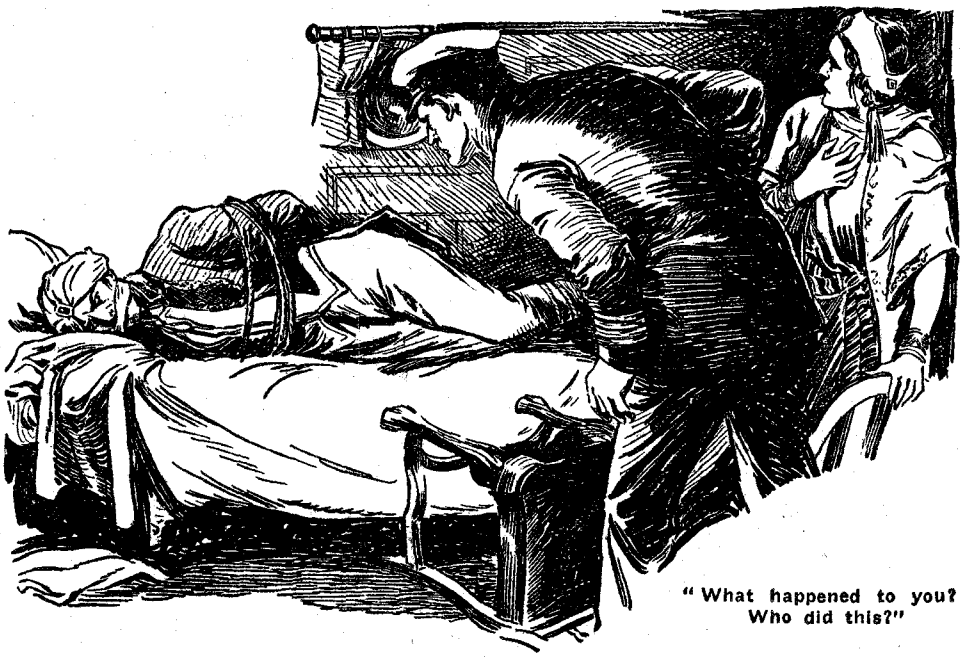

"What happened to you? Who did this?"

Kingdom of the Lost

By LORING BRENT

Author of "The Octopus of Hongkong," "Valley of Missing Men," etc.

There was, literally, going to be the devil to pay as that mystery ship and its weird crew carried Peter the Brazen into the Jaws of Hell in the South China Sea

THIS STORY HAS JUST BEGUN—START IT NOW

WHEN Peter Moore, known in the Orient as Peter the Brazen, accepted the task of recovering two million dollars' worth of stolen diamonds, he had a double purpose. He wanted to help his friend, Dan de Sylva, to whom the diamonds belonged, and he intended to rescue Susan O'Gilvie from Lotus Burma, one of the most beautiful and dangerous women in China. Lotus Burma, known as the Octopus, not only had de Sylva's diamonds; she had, with the aid of a strange drug, gained domination over Susan O'Gilvie. Susan had broken her engagement to Peter as a result.

Disguised as Ameer Prak Chan, Sultan of Sakara, Peter boarded the steamer Langpo, which was carrying Lotus Burma and Susan from Hongkong to Singapore. So effective was his disguise, the Octopus was completely deceived by it when Captain Barberry, of the Langpo, introduced the two.

Peter got a glimpse of the diamonds he was after when Lotus Burma wagered some of them against gems Peter carried. He could tell that the Octopus intended to get all of his jewels before the ship reached Singapore.

Peter was startled when he overheard the captain tell the Octopus that Peter Moore was aboard the ship, and he believed that some one had betrayed him. He was even more startled when he went to the wireless room to send a call for help. As he was about to enter, the door swung

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outward and there stood a man who was the exact image of himself.

CHAPTER VI.

MYSTERY SHIP.

THE Peter Moore in the wireless room doorway had a half-smoked cigarette in his lips, held at a certain angle. How well did the Peter Moore on deck, the Peter Moore garbed as the Sultan of Sakara, know that particular angle!

A chill wind seemed to be blowing through the brain of the spurious Sultan of Sakara. In all his adventures in China, in all his encounters with Oriental magic, he had never received a shock so stupefying as this.

The man who was himself, the man who blocked the wireless room doorway, was regarding him with a faint, pleasant grin.

The Sultan of Sakara fiercely asked, "Who are you?" He wanted to hear this man speak—wanted to hear the sound of his own voice issuing from another's lips.

"My name is Moore—Peter Moore," the other said.

The man who was impersonating a sultan did not know. He could not be sure. He knew that he would not recognize his own voice as his own. Yet he did not need that assurance. He was convinced now that he was under the sway of malignant occult powers. He could not even believe now in the reality of this ship, with its animated dead men for a crew. He could not even believe that he had actually seen Susan O'Gilvie a few minutes ago, or that he had been face to face with a flesh-and-blood Lotus Burma.

He felt certain that he had somehow been made the victim of occult powers, of a species of Yogism. It was as if he were actually, not Peter Moore, but the childishly insane Sultan of Sakara. He knew that certain sorcerers and, presumably, sorceresses, of tribes in the remote fastnesses of the Indo-Chinese jungle practiced these tactics—that by a kind of hypnosis they could exchange the spirit of one man for the spirit of another.

He had always been skeptical of these legends, but he could not be skeptical now. And if he had been actually transformed—had actually become the Sultan of Sakara, then the man in the doorway was actually Peter Moore, and he had lost his soul.

It was a grotesque and fantastic assumption, yet the impersonator of the Malayan nabob had seen too much tonight to believe that this ship of mystery was explainable by the rules of common sense and logic. She was a ship of creeping terror and mystery beyond reasonable explanation.

Pleasantly, the man in the doorway said, "A nice night, isn't it?"

"Delightful!" agreed the Sultan of Sakara.

The man in the gray trenchcoat passed him and strolled down the deck, with cigarette smoke floating off his wide shoulders. The man in the white turban stared after him as the spirit of a dead man might stare at the body he had recently inhabited.

The shocking apparition of Peter Moore proceeded forward and vanished into a doorway. The Sultan of Sakara followed. It was Stateroom 8—two doors removed from his own. The man in the trenchcoat came out with a fresh pack of cigarettes in his hand. He walked on, vanishing around the turn of the deck.

The Sultan of Sakara passed the doorway of Stateroom 8. He hesi-

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tated, turned back with rapidly pumping heart. The light was still on.

FAMILIAR objects were strewn about the room, and about the washstand. Luggage which was his own—or identical with it. One of the bags was open on the bunk. He looked into it—and saw shirts, neckties, underwear, socks—either his own, or identical with his own.

He examined the razor, the toothbrush, the shaving cream and the toothpaste on the washstand. Again—his own, or identical with his own!

A thumping at the back of his head made him feel giddy. He stared at his face in the mirror. Shaken to the roots of his being, half-sick with fear, uncertain as to what his course should be, he stared at the brown face and blue eyes of the Sultan of Sakara.

If he were to clean off the walnut stain, whose face would be revealed? Was it possible to clean off the stain? Was it stain? Or was it the natural pigmentation of his skin?

Never before in his life had he had reason to wonder if he was at the brink of madness.

He left the room and went into his own. Here, he stared again into a mirror. He saw a brown face with a straight nose, firm lips, blue eyes. His own face?

"Good God," he growled, "who am I?"

If he were under the influence of Lotus Burma's sorcery, it was logical that she had placed him in this state for a purpose. Was her purpose simply to secure the elephant ring and the decoy stones—or had she some more devious reason for bending him to her will? Was this her revenge on his presumptiveness?

He reasoned: "This is absolutely fantastic, preposterous, and silly. I have not changed. I am still thinking with my own brain, and not one of my purposes has been changed. I am the man who talked with Dan de Sylva a few hours ago. I am the man who went to Yat Gow's and got this costume. I came aboard this ship to secure those diamonds. I'm going to get them."

A tenderness of his upper gums gave him a better grip on sanity. It was the clever red rubber strip which Yat Gow's black slave had placed there, to give his upper lip a longer appearance. His nostrils were sensitive, too. The silver tubes! He began to smile. He touched the clever rubber mole on his left earlobe. It was dead to the touch.

He wasn't, thank God, the Sultan of Sakara, after all! He was Peter Moore. And the other man—? Another Peter Moore? An identical twin? Or a trick of that beautiful sorceress?

He went on deck again, anxious for another glimpse of this man who was identical with—or actually was—Peter Moore. But he saw nothing of him.

In the stern, he stopped, placed his elbows on the worn rail and stared out into the uncompromising blackness of the night. Far off, he saw a lighthouse beaconing. The Langpo was well at sea now. There was not even a glow to the north to indicate where Hongkong lay. Off to starboard somewhere was Macao, but he could see nothing of that great opium center of South China.

The blackness was beginning to give way to gray. A ghostly light was threatening the night. Dawn would be here presently. There was a dampness in the air, a promise of fog. He could see no stars, no moonglow.

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He had the premonition that dreadful things would happen when this ship reached that stretch of the South China Sea known as the Jaws of Hell.

HE turned away from the rail. At his elbow was the partly-opened window at which he had stood listening to the conversation between Susan and Lotus Burma.

Lights still burned in that enchanted room, but it was empty now. Lotus Burma had retired. He presumed that she slept in an adjoining room.

His eyes darted about the room, and were suddenly attracted by a gleam in the midst of the purple cushions. It was the box containing the de Sylva diamonds! With careless indifference, she left it lying there, unwatched, unguarded, a fortune in diamonds!

It proved merely what he had sensed before. She was without fear. Her feeling for thieves, for enemies, was one of contempt and scorn. He could walk into that room now and walk out with the de Sylva diamonds. Yet, what would be the use? She had absolute control over this ship.

A wave of weariness swept over the Sultan of Sakara. He had had no sleep to-night, and none the previous night. His eyeballs itched. His lungs and heart ached, but he dared not sleep —dared not, literally, be caught napping.

He took a turn about the deck, but saw no one. The light still burned in Room 8, but the man who was Peter Moore—or so startlingly resembled him—was not there.

The dampness became more noticeable. A dead gray light filtered through the blackness. Dawn was coming. In its spectral light, the Sultan of Sakara saw, looming ahead perhaps two miles away, a great wall of fog. It stretched to east and west as far as he could see, and the face of it rose up until it vanished into the gloom of clouds.

A boy of sixteen or seventeen passed him, dressed in steward's whites, softly stroking a triangle of bronze wire with a leather-covered stick. The triangle sang softly, in a minor key.

Breakfast! In spite of his apprehension, his nerve fag, the Sultan of Sakara was hungry. He followed the steward below.

Captain Barberry and the man in the gray trenchcoat were already at table in the small, grimy dining saloon. Peter Moore—or his double—no longer wore the trenchcoat, but he was familiar in a suit of double-breasted blue serge, a blue tie, a tan shirt.

He was sitting halfway down the table from the captain, devouring ham and eggs, the flaccid ham and the anæmic eggs of China. The Sultan of Sakara seated himself in a chair opposite, and gave him two quick glances.

Relief surged over the Sultan of Sakara. Two swift glances had reassured him. He had stared into his own face, in the process of shaving, too many years to be fooled. Without a hat, and with fairly good light from a chandelier flooding his hair and face, the difference, while slight, was, to the real Peter Moore, sufficient.

It was in the hairline and the sideburns. The impostor's hair grew down to a slightly sharper point on his forehead than did Peter Moore's, and his sideburns, cut short, as were Peter's, were fractionally wider.

Not one person of Peter's wide collection of acquaintances would have noticed these subtle differences. And Peter wondered if Susan would notice them. He also wondered what this careful imitator's game was. Some-

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thing, no doubt, to do with Lotus Burma. The diamonds? Possibly.

But he was not worried about the impostor's game. That he had a very passable duplicate aboard this mystery ship suited his own plans perfectly. It would distract suspicion from himself. But he realized that if Susan O'Gilvie saw this man in adequate light—studied his face for more than a few seconds—she would recognize him—and no doubt betray him.

BUT his gestures, his mannerisms, were perfect. He was trying to make Captain Barberry talk. And the master of the Langpo appeared to be most reluctant.

"What's your nationality, captain?"

The gray eyes glanced at him vacantly. "I am Eurasian."

"But what's your country?"

"China."

"North or South?"

"North."

In good Mandarin Chinese, the impostor asked his next question: "Does an honest man reach up to straighten his hat under a ripe peach tree?"

A grimace, a distorted smile, momentarily twisted Captain Barberry's lips, but he did not answer the question.

The impostor asked him other questions. How long had he been at sea? What countries had he visited? Captain Barberry grew surly, then silent. He gave grunts for answers. His slack mouth trembled. Grotesque muscle knots ridged along his heavy jaw bones. The impression he gave was one of stupidity tinged with a growing fear. His vacant eyes swam. He reached up from time to time to pluck at a cowlick of his drab, flat hair which hung down on his idiotic forehead.

He seemed frightened, but he did not seem resentful. And it was hard indeed to imagine a spark of resentment or any similar emotion lighting those dead eyes. He gave the effect of a man completely cowed. And he gave the effect of wincing when the stranger's questions were too sharp or too insistent.

The stranger tried a variety of tongues—Cantonese, Japanese, Indo-Chinese. But he was met by the cloudy wall of those haunted, hunted eyes—and grunts.

These eyes became more and more distracted. They slid about uneasily at first, then frantically, in their sockets.

The ruthless questioning was interrupted by a deep and awful sobbing in the very bowels of the ship. This sound translated itself into a hissing surge of steam, then a melancholy bellowing. The Langpo's whistle was announcing the fog.

Captain Barberry's eyes slid across Peter's walnut-stained face. He clicked his coffee cup into its saucer and sprang up. Like an uneasy ghost, he took himself out of the saloon.

The impostor was through with his ham and eggs. He lit a cigarette and smiled across the table at the Sultan of Sakara, with his left eyebrow slightly raised—a smile that was, or should have been, familiar enough to the dark man in the turban.

"You're the Sultan of Sakara, aren't you?"

The Sultan of Sakara answered with the Sultan of Sakara's particular grin—a somewhat wolfish grimace, with eyes squeezed almost shut. He nodded.

"I recognized you from photographs—and that ring. My name's Peter Moore."

The impersonator held his cigarette

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well down in the crotch formed by the forefinger and middle finger of his right hand.

The Sultan of Sakara, who had lit a cigarette, held his in the tips of his fingers.

The spurious Peter Moore let smoke trickle from his nostrils.

The Sultan of Sakara squirted smoke through his teeth.

"I am charmed to meet you at last, Mr. Moore. I've heard about you, of course."

THE two men shook hands. The stranger dropped his elbows to the cloth and bent forward. His eyes sparkled with interest. They narrowed. He darted glances about the dingy little room and said, low-voiced: "If you'll pardon me, your majesty, I'm curious to know why you are traveling on a ship like this. There are three large, fast, luxurious ships sailing from Hongkong this morning."

"It was a whim," his majesty replied.

"Has it struck you there's anything strange — mystifying — about this ship?"

"Strange? Mystifying?" the sultan repeated with that Malayan-Oxford accent.

"That captain—the crew! They're like ghosts. I've been in every part of the Far East—and their nationality baffles me."

"I'm afraid I'm at a loss, Mr. Moore."

He was sparring, and he knew that the other man, a clever student of his methods, of his very processes of thought, was doing likewise—trying to fit him into a baffling picture.

The stranger said quietly, "I dropped into the wireless room last night to send a message. The operator said the wireless equipment was out of order. I offered to fix it. I used to be a wireless operator."

"Really?"

"For years! He declined my offer. Why, your majesty? Because the wireless apparatus isn't real! It's made of papier-mâché!"

The sultan's eyes gleamed. "How fantastic!"

"The entire ship is fantastic, your majesty. You booked passage for Singapore, did you not?"

"I did, Mr. Moore."

The man across from him shrugged. "So did I. I hope we get there. But I'm dubious. If there was any way to send a message from this ship, I'd send it. I'd send an S. O. S. Wouldn't you?"

The Sultan of Sakara pursed his lips with the air of a man in troubled thought.

He wondered just what the stranger was driving at.

"We have an expression in America," the synthetic Peter Moore said," "that covers this ship very neatly. Phony."

"Yes, I've heard of it. A very pungent and useful word, Mr. Moore."

"It applies to this ship. She is phony. So is everybody on board." He hesitated, gave that familiar, lifted-eyebrow smile. "Except you and me, of course, your majesty."

"But what would be the purpose of it?"

The stranger shrugged again. The sultan recognized that shrug. It was perfect. "This is the China coast. *Maskee!* And some time to-morrow, we'll be entering the Jaws of Hell. I'll see you later."

He got up and picked up his hat and trenchcoat.

"I'll be seeing you," the Sultan of

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Sakara said with dry good humor, "in Davy Jones's locker!"

The stranger gave him a quick, surprised grin—and went out. The sultan finished his breakfast in solitary grandeur, then went on deck and proceeded to the wireless room. There was no answer to his knock. He tried the knob. The door opened upon familiar instruments. There was no one in the room.

He quickly examined the switchboard, the switches and some of the instruments. He did not have to look far to verify what his impersonator had said. The instruments were of pressed wood or carved wood, cleverly fashioned and cleverly lacquered or painted.

Not one of them was real.

With this latest item to add to the long list of baffling mysteries, he went on deck. The Langpo was in dense fog now, and the whistle was blowing at short intervals. Thick gray vapor went streaming aft, obscuring any object more than fifty feet away. The Langpo was proceeding through the fog at her usual speed, which, in itself, was mysterious.

CHAPTER VII.

CAUGHT!

THE Sultan of Sakara sauntered around to Room 8, and knocked. His impersonator was not at home, but the door was unlocked. Without hesitation, the sultan went in. He wanted to find out just what the man's business was aboard this ship.

He went through the unknown's luggage with the meticulous care of a Japanese spy. He looked for secret hiding places in the luggage. And when he found nothing of interest there, he explored the washstand and the bunk.

Under the bunk, in the life preserver rack, very cunningly concealed, was an unlabeled bottle with an ornamental glass stopper. He took out the stopper and sniffed the pale blue liquid. It smelled like fine hair tonic. But it wasn't hair tonic. Precious stuff, this. It was the most expensive hair bleach that money could buy. And it would appear that the impersonator was not as blond as he looked.

If the spurious Sultan of Sakara had wished to spoil the spurious Peter Moore's game, he might have done so by pouring the contents of that bottle down the drain. But he did not wish to. He wanted to wait for developments. In all his life, he had never been so curious about a man.

There was a rattling at the door handle. He was, presumably, trapped. But he did not attempt to hide the bottle.

The door opened. The blond man in the gray hat and the gray trenchcoat started into the room, then stopped.

He said, with an apologetic grin, "I beg your pardon, sultan, but I thought this was my room."

"It is your room. Come right in."

The apologetic grin vanished. The man in the trenchcoat glanced swiftly about the room, but his eyes returned to the bottle of pale-blue stuff in Peter's hand, and the skin about his blue eyes tightened a little.

He came into the small room, closing the door firmly behind him. He placed his back against the door, took out a cigarette and lighted it. He exhaled the smoke through his nostrils.

"A cat," he said, "was killed one time because it got curious."

"You must pardon my intrusion,"

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the sultan said. "I was naturally curious. When you failed to recognize me, I knew you were not my old friend Peter Moore. I suspected you at once. But I was amazed by the resemblance. You are not Peter Moore."

"No?" the other drawled. "That puts us in a hell of a mess, doesn't it? I'm not Peter Moore—and you're not the Sultan of Sakara! The Sultan of Sakara is an old friend of mine. In Paris. When you failed to recognize me, I knew you were not my old friend the Sultan of Sakara. But I was amazed by the resemblance. You *are* Peter Moore!"

The stranger was no longer grinning. There was a nasty twist to his mouth. His eyes were half-closed and somewhat menacing.

"Get this, Moore. Keep out of my business or I'll spoil yours! You're a trouble-maker—but don't let me catch you making trouble for me!"

"There's a possibility," Peter quietly suggested, "that we could be useful to each other."

The unknown gave a short, barking laugh. "On the principle that a rat knows the way of rats?" he jeered. "Not a chance! I don't want your help. We don't know each other. I don't want to know you. Now, get the hell out of here." This was said in English. He added to it an insult in Chinese—the filthiest, most blasphemous insult in the language.

PETER hesitated a moment, tempted to smack him on the jaw. A glimpse of a figure in grap approaching along the deck made him think better of the impulse. He stepped out on deck as Lotus Burma emerged, like a wraith, from the fog.

The Octopus was so preoccupied that she did not see him until she was almost past. Yards of soft gray crêpe de Chine were wrapped about her, Burmese fashion. Her golden skin and ink-black hair were startling above the gray silk.

She saw the Sultan of Sakara and gave him a quick, somewhat contemptuous smile. Then she saw the man in the doorway. Her step faltered. The smile did not go away, but it subtly changed and the eyes went narrow and greenly shimmering. Here was hatred in terms of utter contempt. Behind this was gloating—triumph! She went on quickly.

And Peter gleaned that this was the first meeting between her and his impersonator since the latter had come aboard. Certainly, she had not recognized him as an impostor. Peter glanced at the man in the doorway. The unknown was not smiling. His mouth and eyes were hard with determination.

And Peter, taking himself away, wondered again what the fellow's game was.

He returned to his own stateroom, undressed and turned in. He ached with sleeplessness, but before he dozed off, he made a decision. He would secure the diamonds to-night. He did not know why the man in Room 8 was aboard, but he would take no chances with those diamonds!

He was asleep almost the instant his head touched the pillow. The booming of the fog whistle did not even penetrate his dreams. They were not happy dreams. In them, Susan was in some difficulty, a prisoner in a great gray castle, and he was helpless. He tried vainly to rescue her.

Late in the afternoon, a knocking at his door awakened him. A steward was at the door with a note. When Peter saw the handwriting on the en-

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velope, his heart suddenly began beating rapidly. He read the note.

H.R.H. the SULTAN OF SAKARA.
YOUR HIGHNESS:
I'd be delighted if you'd have tea—or cocktails—with me—and pardon the informality of this. Will you?
Sincerely,
SUSAN O'GILVIE.

Peter told the steward to wait. Sooner or later, he would have to face Susan—would have to undergo the scrutiny of her clever violet eyes. It might be wise to meet that test now—have it over with.

He examined himself in the washstand mirror. To himself, with that strangely flaring nose, that slightly protuberant upper lip, that walnut skin, he looked utterly strange. He was convinced that the man who was posing as himself had not penetrated his disguise, but had either guessed his identity or been informed of it.

He dressed carefully, selecting a fresh white turban, a sapphire-blue jacket and canary-yellow trousers.

When he was ready, the steward conducted him to Miss O'Gilvie's suite. It was next door to but not connected with Lotus Burma's suite, and it comprised a small sitting room and a bedroom.

SUSAN opened the door to his knock—a slim, beautiful, eager-eyed girl in a blue tea gown. It was their first actual meeting since she had told him, the night before, that she would never marry him—that she never wanted to see him again.

It surprised him that she looked no different. To be sure, she was not angry now. But she was excited. Her eyes were brilliant and her cheeks were feverishly flushed. Excitement always did this to Susan—her whole being seemed to quicken, to glow. He had never seen her more beautiful than she was this afternoon.

Standing there, looking up at him with those large, amazing eyes, he forgot his apprehension, his fear of discovery. She was so lovely, so slim, so softly appealing that he wanted to cry out, to crush her in his arms. Instead, he gave her the Sultan of Sakara's famous wolfish smile, and he accompanied it with a gesture of his left hand, that quick, jerking gesture, as of a man about to slap a mosquito—a gesture for which Ameer Prak Chan was equally famous.

The girl with violet eyes was looking sharply into his face and something in her eyes seemed to quicken. His heart began to hammer again. Did she recognize him? Was she going to pretend that she didn't?

Then she cried: "I am delighted and flattered, your highness!"

With a deep bow, he retorted, "Oh, I assure you, my dear lady, it is I who am honored!"

She seemed pleased. She seemed thrilled. But even if she had guessed his identity, she might have seemed both pleased and thrilled. For Susan was unpredictable. If she had guessed his identity, she might be delighted at his boldness. She might, on the other hand, be acting. He was certain he had lost Susan forever—that she was determined to wash him and all memory of him from her life and from her mind.

She was charming—her old blithe, gay self. She had heard a little of the Sultan of Sakara. She wanted to hear more. She had an insatiable thirst for adventurous thrills. She wanted to hear stories which were adventurous and thrilling. Very obviously, she had

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not regretted her decision to wash Peter Moore out of her life. She had dedicated her life to the pursuit of adventure.

He talked and she drew him out. Well-versed in the life and activities of Ameer Prak Chan, he told her hair-raising and blood-chilling stories of the Malayan jungles—of tiger and boar hunts, of ghosts, of fabulous mines. She was fascinated.

He was presently convinced that Susan O'Gilvie had not guessed who he was. He talked and gestured with the greatest care, and he took care that she saw nothing of his profile.

His curiosity carried him presently into dangerous waters. As she was pouring tea, he said, with an air of apology, "Miss O'Gilvie, didn't I read in yesterday's Hongkong papers that you were to be married to-day?"

She gave him a quick smile. "You did. But it's off."

"Wasn't the young man named Peter Moore?"

Her smile became a little fixed. "Yes, your highness."

"Isn't that the young man I've seen aboard this ship?"

The smile vanished and the lovely red mouth became stern. "It is," she answered. "He is a fool to follow me."

"Love is a cruel mistress."

Susan smiled again, a little bitterly. "That's why I stopped being in love. I don't want love. I don't want marriage."

He could have said, "You wanted it badly enough for almost two years—until you met this devil woman!" But what he said was, "Ah, you American girls! Freedom! It's all you want."

"It isn't all I want," Susan declared. "I want adventure—excitement." Her eyes were hard and glittering. She meant it, very definitely. She had gone over wholly to adventure, to the romance of dangerous thrills.

TWO years ago, when he first met Susan, Peter had sensed the two sides to her nature. With one of them, very shortly after that first meeting, she loved him. She had told him frankly she adored him. And she had followed him over the face of China. But during this time, the other nature had developed until now it appeared that *Dr. Jekyll* had become completely *Mr. Hyde.*

He had never loved her adventurous side, and he had hated to see it gradually dominate her. Susan in search of a thrill, of new and untried excitements had been a trial, a growing problem.

She did not want to talk about Peter Moore. She babbled about the adventures she had had and of adventures in strange lands which she hoped to experience. He was forced to conclude that Susan was on this ship of her own free will—and he wondered what her fate would be—wondered where this strange ship, with its ghostly crew, was taking all of them.

She had heard about the Jaws of Hell—was perfectly fascinated by the weird tales she had heard. He did not tell her of his discovery of the Aronga's drinking glass or the Pelgrasse's towels, or of the wireless room with its papier-mâché equipment. All of these mysteries would explain themselves in due course. But he asked her what she thought of the crew.

Susan had paid no attention to the crew. She said: "I think Captain Barberry is perfectly fascinating. He has such weird eyes!"

He left her parlor presently with the

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feeling that he was safe from discovery by Susan as long as he never let her look too long at his profile.

At dinner that night, as at breakfast, no one appeared in the dingy little dining saloon but Captain Barberry and the two impostors. The fraudulent Peter Moore ignored the spurious Sultan of Sakara and addressed all of his remarks to the captain. He again tried to draw out the captain, to make him talk, but that gray-faced, strange man gave him no satisfaction. He never once lifted those cloudy, mystifying eyes from his plate, and his answers were in the form of grunts and monosyllables.

After dinner Peter took a turn about the deck.

The Langpo was still ploughing through dense fog at full speed, sounding her whistle at thirty-second intervals. She wallowed and creaked in a long cross-swell.

He wondered again what her destination might be. And he knew that both he and the insolent stranger were completely at Lotus Burma's mercy. He retired to his room and removed his pocket radio receiver from the beefwood chest—and wished now that he had devoted all of his time to developing a portable wireless transmitter instead of a receiver.

He turned on the dials, and adjusted the volume control so that the speaker produced the softest of sounds. The air was full of a shrill piping. He could hardly tune it out. He recognized call letters and signatures. The Langpo was very close to the Asiatic squadron of the American fleet! But there was no way of signaling for help.

Restless, he put the receiver away and went back on deck. The Langpo's disregard of the fog made him uneasy. Why should she be driven at such speed through this fog?

CHAPTER VIII.

TORTURE.

HE walked aft. As he passed the windows of Lotus Burma's parlor, he saw her talking to a steward. She was evidently giving him some instructions, for the steward kept bobbing his head like an idiot trying vainly to understand. But he apparently understood. She went to the door of her bedroom and vanished. The steward waited at the door. After a moment, she handed him the purple satin gown she had been wearing. The steward, bobbing his head in that idiotic way, took the gown and went out by way of the door at the after end of the room.

The Sultan of Sakara waited. He could not see much of the bedroom, but through the crack he caught glimpses first, of a naked arm, then of a naked foot. And presently the light in the bedroom went out.

He would, he decided, give her a half hour in which to fall asleep. He walked forward and searched about among the donkey engines in the peak until he found what he wanted. It was a length of iron wire smaller in diameter than a fine pencil lead, and was wrapped around the broken insulation on a steam pipe. He unwrapped the wire and coiled it up. There was approximately twelve feet of it. The coil he stowed away in a pocket.

He returned aft and looked in Lotus Burma's parlor. He could see one end of the black jewel box protruding from the purple cushions, and his heart began to pound more rapidly.

Then he went to the door. It was

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not locked. He opened it and went in, with his heart hammering. He knew what he was about to do would precipitate trouble. He wanted to precipitate trouble. He wanted to bring a hazy picture into focus.

With quick strides, he went to the great tumbled pile of cushions. He picked up the box. As he did so, he saw, from the tail of his eye, a figure flit past the windows on the port side.

The diamond thief leaped to one of the purple brocade wall hangings—slipped behind it as the door latch rattled. He flattened himself against the wall, with his head back. He heard the door open. A man's voice called, "Miss Burma! Miss Burma!"

A triangle of light fell on Peter's forehead just above his left eye. By going up on his tiptoes, his eye reached the rent in the cloth. He saw Captain Barberry standing in the middle of the room, his lips working, his eyes staring wide.

The bedroom door squeaked. Peter could not see Lotus Burma. But he heard the swish of satin as she entered the room.

"Madam, she is weeping. She is hysterical," Captain Barberry said.

"Bring her here," the woman snapped.

The captain went out. Over the hammering of his heart, Peter heard her moving about. Then she moved into his range of vision. Over jade-green pajamas she was wearing a negligee of scarlet satin. She was fitting a cigarette into the amethyst holder. She held the cigarette into an incense brazier, puffed, straightened up. In the palm of her left hand, the man behind the curtain glimpsed a small white object. It might have been a flake of polished ivory—or alabaster.

Dust in the heavy curtain made him want to cough. It tickled his throat until his very restraint caused tears to gush into his eyes. The sharp eyes of Lotus Burma were darting about the room. She stared at the pile of pillows, then at the curtain behind which Peter was hiding. He could have sworn she started impulsively toward him, as if, by some clairvoyant power, she actually detected his presence.

THEN the door rattled and opened and Susan came into the room, followed by the captain. Susan was dressed as she had been when he saw her that afternoon. But she was no longer the radiant, adventurous girl of teatime. Her eyes and cheeks were red and swollen. Her hair was rumpled. Her clothing was disarranged. She had evidently thrown herself on her bed and given way to hysterics. She was still sobbing, still blind with tears.

"I don't want to see you!" Susan cried.

"You were having hysterics," Lotus Burma said severely. "Is it because that man is on this ship?"

"No. I'm afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know," the girl wailed. "Everything's so strange. This ship's so strange. These—these men are so queer. Who are they? Where is this ship going?"

"You will find out in due time."

"But you told me we were going to Java. You were lying to me. Who are these horrible men?" Her voice was rising. She was screaming now. "I don't want to go on with this. I'm afraid."

Quietly, the Octopus woman said, "Hold her, captain."

"No!" Susan screamed. "Keep away from me, you horrible creature!"

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But the captain had seized her by the elbows from behind. She struggled. She screamed. She kicked at him. But Captain Barberry did not release her. She began laughing and sobbing at once.

Lotus Burma approached her. The meaning of the white glint Peter had seen in the palm of her hand now became clear to him. It was a small alabaster phial with a kingfisher jade stopper.

He held himself grimly. He wanted to spring out, dash the phial from her hand. But he controlled himself.

The Octopus woman seized Susan by the throat, pushed her head back. And when Susan wriggled away, Lotus Burma grasped a handful of the girl's hair, close to the scalp, and twisted it. Susan screamed and became limp. She might have fainted.

Lotus Burma unstoppered the phial and pressed the mouth of it between Susan's lips. A drop or two of the incredible purple drug escaped, trickling down the girl's chin.

The woman released her and stepped back. Peter, staring with fascination, saw a subtle change, then a more striking change come over Susan. She no longer wept. Her head came up. Magically, she took on an aspect of haughty dignity. She became regal.

Her eyes began to glow, a curious smile appeared at her bruised lips. She was a different girl.

"You can release her now," Lotus Burma said.

Captain Barberry let her go. Her eyes seemed to flash.

"Do you feel better now, Tsi-Lo-Lan?" the woman asked.

"Yes, Miss Burma. I feel—I feel quite myself."

"You have no desire to leave this ship now?"

The girl gave her an imperious little smile. "Why, no," she said in a puzzled voice. Her sweet, timid personality was gone. She was as haughty, as self-possessed as any queen.

"You long for the greatest adventure that life can hold?"

"Of course I do!"

"Perhaps you wish to retire now, Tsi-Lo-Lan."

"I do."

She left the room. Captain Barberry hesitated.

"Have her watched every moment," Lotus Burma directed. "If we lose her—you lose your head."

"Yes, madam," the man said. His eyes were more vacant than ever. His sagging lower lip was shining wet with saliva.

He went to the door and out on deck. Lotus Burma stood in the center of the room, with her back to the hanging behind which Peter stood, then she turned and walked from view.

He again heard the squeaking of the bedroom door. Above the throbbing of the woodwork, he heard her moving about in her bedroom. He permitted a full half hour to pass before he moved. Then he slipped from behind the curtain, and, with the box of diamonds under his arm, swiftly crossed the room and let himself out on deck.

RETURNING quickly to his room, he encountered no one. He went rapidly to work. He untied the black ribbon from the box and opened it. For a moment, he let his eyes feast on that glittering, icy mass of diamonds—two million dollars' worth of the finest stones in the Orient! Then he added to the treasure the rest of the stones—the diamonds, sapphires, rubies and emeralds—which he had borrowed from Daniel de Sylva. Last

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to go into the box was the fabulous elephant ring.

Whimsically, he rubbed the elephant head down his cheek and said, "Bring me luck!" Closing the box, he swiftly wired the lid down. He went on deck again, and now he proceeded with utmost caution. But he met no one.

Fog swirled about him. Moisture, collecting on the rigging, dripped on deck. The fog whistle blew at monotonous intervals, and it had a hoarse, dreary sound. Far off, he heard a ship's answer—a deep bellow of an answer, and he presumed that the ship, invisible, was a large one, a liner.

When he had hidden the box of diamonds, he did not immediately return to his stateroom. From one of the forward lifeboats, he removed about thirty feet of weathered rope. This he carried into his room. He scattered the contents of the beefwood chest about the room. He turned out the light and got into bed—with the rope.

He began the slow and laborious job of lashing himself into the bunk, working upwards from his feet. Lashing his wrists together was the most difficult, but he succeeded finally, and when the final slipknot had been laboriously worked into place, he was lashed there, helpless.

In more ways than one, he was taking long chances. By stealing the diamonds, he had, in effect, planted a bomb. The bomb would blow up when Lotus Burma discovered her diamonds were missing. The Langpo would, he hoped, cease being a ship of baffling mystery and become a ship popping with trouble. The rope tied so tightly about him was uncomfortable and prevented sleep. Hours passed. The Sultan of Sakara was suddenly aware of a tension within himself—an awareness of something missing.

The fog whistle had stopped blowing! Dawn came shortly—a cold and wretched light—and gave him another surprise. Through the window he could see that the fog was not gone—it was as thick as ever! He could see it drifting in a great gray cloud past the window—dense fog. Why had the whistle stopped sounding its warning?

Listening, he believed he heard, faintly, the voices of other ships in the fog—once, the shrill warning of a destroyer, then, the bass, jovial booming of a large steamer.

The light increased. And he was suddenly aware of agitation on deck. Men were running to and fro. Voices, muffled by fog, were shouting. Men raced past his window.

He did not believe that the ship was in trouble, or the engines would have stopped.

Silence was presently restored. He heard nothing for perhaps a half hour but the steady vibration of the woodwork, the creaking and groaning of the hull as it responded to the throb of the engines and the lifting and falling of long ground swells.

Then, far away, a man's voice arose in a thin wail of pain. The wailing continued for several minutes, and it was of a character that started the hairs on Peter's neck to bristling.

PRESENTLY, footsteps sounded on the deck outside his room. A hand seized the knob and jerked the door open.

"Your majesty!" a woman's voice shrilled. Then: "Oh, good God!"

It was Lotus Burma, but a Lotus Burma changed almost beyond recognition. Her hair was in disorder. Her face was pale. Her lips were raw.

Behind her, vacant of eye, slack of jaw, loomed Captain Barberry.

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She stumbled into the room and stared at him. Wildly she cried, "What happened to you? Who did this?"

She stripped the gag from his mouth. He wet his paralyzed lips. "I —don't—know, madam."

"You've been robbed!"

"Yes."

"The ring—where's the ring?"

"Gone! Everything's gone!"

She shrieked: "My diamonds, too! Captain, take off these ropes!" She was wringing her hands. She was distracted, frantic.

The man on the bed reflected: "Whatever happens, this is worth all the trouble." Her haughty disdain, her coolness, her contempt were of the past.

"Didn't you see the robber?" she panted.

"No, madam. In the dark, some one pounced on me. I heard this person ransacking my trunk. I felt the ring being snatched off my finger. I saw no one."

Lotus Burma gave a despairing wail. Then, with better control: "We will find the robber. Never fear! I think we have already found him."

She stormed out of the little stateroom and vanished, followed by the vacant-eyed, wet-mouthed captain. And the howls of pain Peter had heard were continued.

He went on deck. The sounds as of a man in agony were coming from somewhere aft. They were, indeed, issuing from Lotus Burma's parlor—from the lips of the insolent stranger who had come aboard in Hongkong cleverly disguised as Peter Moore. He was screaming with pain.

Through a window, the Sultan of Sakara saw him. He was being subjected to an old, a medieval method of torture—one called the *strappado*. He was seated in a chair, with his legs and body strapped to it. His arms, drawn out back of him—back of the chair—were bound at the wrist with rope. A stout rope led from this binding up and over an iron hook in the ceiling, and down to the hands of two sailors standing near the open doorway.

They had pulled enough of the rope up and over the hook, so that the luckless adventurer was clear of the floor —and the chair was clear of the floor. The weight of himself and the heavy chair was being supported by those delicate sockets where arms met shoulders. The weight was threatening to dislocate them—to pull the bones out of the sockets, and the pain must have been agonizing.

This spurious Peter Moore was pale and glistening with sweat. His mouth was working. Shrieks were being wrenched from him. And mingled with the shrieks of the tortured man were those of the furious woman.

She shrieked: "Where did you hide them?"

And the suffering man answered, "I didn't! I didn't steal them!"

He fainted then. "Lower him," Lotus Burma said. "When he recovers consciousness—up he goes again!"

The Sultan of Sakara sauntered aft. Lotus Burma had just gone forward. Peter heard her screaming at members of the crew. Men were swarming all about the decks. Hatch covers had been removed. Men were climbing in and out of holds like hungry rats—these ghostly, vacant-eyed men who looked like brothers. Every square inch of the slatternly old tub would be gone over. But they would not, Peter believed, find the diamonds.

He said to the two sailors, the tor-

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turers, "Get busy, you dogs! Hunt for that black box! I will attend to this rascal!" And he delivered this in such a ferocious tone that the two sailors leaped to obey him.

Thus he was alone with the stranger when he recovered his senses. The fellow stared at him with bloodshot, pain-racked eyes. His chest rose and fell with short gasps, sobs. But when he saw the man in the turban standing over him, he controlled his sobs. His face hardened, and the ghost of a smile flitted across his lips.

"Yeah," he whispered. "I was a damned fool to come busting into your game. But I thought you were sailing on the King of Asia. Don't worry, I won't squeal. What's going to happen to us?"

"We'll probably be dumped overboard," Peter said cheerfully, "minus our heads—if she finds those diamonds."

"Did you hide them safely?"

"She'll never find them. But she won't do any more of this."

"Keep your turban on. I can take it. You know damned well the Sultan of Sakara loves torture. If you stop this they'll have that mole off your left ear-lobe before you can bat an eye. Where's this old hooker going?"

"I don't know."

"Listen! In case anything happens to me—if you get out of this mess safely—I'm—"

"Some one's coming!"

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERY IS SOLVED.

SOME one was running down the deck. It was Susan O'Gilvie. Close behind her came Lotus Burma and Captain Barberry.

The girl ran into the room, glanced at the Sultan of Sakara, then at the man lashed to the chair, and cried: "Oh, Peter! What are they doing to you?"

She had evidently been awakened by the tortured man's screams. She wore a frilly blue negligee over her night-gown. Her eyes were still dark with sleep.

Lotus Burma said hysterically: "I told you this man would make trouble! I should have had his throat cut! I should have had him lashed in irons and thrown overboard! I was a fool to indulge your silly whim!"

"My whim?" Susan cried. "You were afraid of him! You've always been afraid of him. Why are you doing this? What has he done?"

"He stole my diamonds—the box-ful! He has hidden them somewhere on this ship. And the sultan's—he stole all of his stones and the elephant ring. Hoist him, captain!"

Captain Barberry seized the rope. Susan shrieked: "Don't you dare!" She ran around to the front of the chair, and for the first time since he had come aboard, Susan had a full glimpse of his face. She began, tremulously, "Peter—" Then she checked herself. Her eyes grew wide. She uttered a small, hysterical laugh. "This man," she announced, "is not Peter Moore!"

Lotus Burma's face seemed to stiffen. "You're lying!"

"Look for yourself," Susan cried. "He hasn't Peter's eyes. And look at his hair. In a hundred ways, he's different."

The octopus woman seemed uncertain. She looked steadily into Susan's eyes, then into the impostor's face.

"Who are you?" she snapped.

"My name is Jim Saunders," the

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man answered. "I am the United States Vice Consul at Foochow. The Consul General in Hongkong put this job up to me. And he knows, of course, that I'm on this ship. If anything happens to me—if I don't return —what's going to happen to you?"

Lotus Burma stared at him with the ferocity of a tiger about to pounce upon a victim.

"What are you doing on this ship?"

Jim Saunders gave her his twisted grin. "Nothing much, Miss Burma. Just checking up on you. There was a little kidnaping job pulled off in Hongkong eight or ten hours before you sailed. A girl called Marcia Pool would have been fed to an octopus if the man I'm impersonating hadn't stepped in and stopped you."

The octopus woman cried: "It's a lie!"

"Oh, sure, it's all a lie. The truth is, I'm Mahatma Ghandi, looking for a new place to go on a fast."

"What are you doing on this ship?" Lotus Burma repeated wrathfully.

"Just what I said. Checking you up. We've got kind of curious about your mysterious disappearances. We wondered where you holed up when you weren't pulling off a little job somewhere."

"You will never leave this ship alive!"

"No?" Saunders jeered. "It's up to you, baby. If I don't show up in Hongkong inside of sixty days, you'd better stay holed up the rest of your life."

In a breathless voice, Susan said, "Of all the utterly amazing—" She turned, with a quick eager smile, to the Sultan of Sakara. And it caught that Oriental nabob completely off guard. He was presenting his profile, and his face must have worn some characteristic expression. For Susan cried: "Peter! It's you!"

LOTUS BURMA stared at him only for a moment. Then she shrieked orders. Men came swarming, but Peter did not try to escape. He had anticipated this development. Sooner or later, it was inevitable. He was roughly searched, then his arms were roped.

The octopus woman wore a look of triumph. Color flowed back into her beautiful face. Her dark-green eyes sparkled and flashed.

With arms folded on chest, she looked up into his dark face.

"Perhaps," she said, "you wish to tell me where my diamonds are."

Susan whimpered, "Peter, tell her! Don't let her torture you."

"They're overboard," he said calmly.

Lotus Burma lost some of her composure. "You're lying! Where are my diamonds?"

"Overboard!"

"That's right," Jim Saunders said cheerfully. "I saw him throw 'em over myself."

"Take this man away," the octopus woman ordered. "Lock him up!"

And when Jim Saunders had been taken away, she reiterated her question. "Where are those diamonds?"

And when Peter repeated his answer, she said, "Take him forward. We will let him swing awhile by the thumbs. Perhaps he will remember."

Susan began to scream. Lotus Burma clapped a hand over the girl's convulsing mouth. Captain Barberry seized Susan's hands from behind, held her rigidly while the woman poured a dose of the fantastic purple drug into Susan's mouth.

Her struggling ceased. Once again,

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that magical, almost frightening transformation took place in her. She became calm. Her chin came up. Her eyes glowed mysteriously.

Peter said, "Can't you fight that stuff off, Susan?"

And she stared at him regally. "You shall be punished for following me!"

He was taken forward, and on his way he made a new discovery—new fuel for mystery! The decks, the deck cabins, the holds were swarming with men as a Chinese beggar swarms with vermin. Dozens of them! Countless times as many men as were required, by the law of any known country, in the crew of a ship of this size! They scrambled out in the fog, these fantastic gray men, with their idiots' eyes—as alike as rats in a cellar!

A simple but effective torture machine was made ready for Peter Moore. One of the cargo booms was unshipped and lifted, so that the great buff arm was at an angle of forty-five degrees. From the upper and outer end of this, a rope was run through a block. The lashing about Peter's wrists was removed. Sailors lashed marlin about the upper ends of his thumbs, and the ends of these small ropes were spliced to the end of the rope dangling from the boom.

Four men laid hold of the other end of the rope. It was tightened until his arms were lifted over his head, until he was standing on tiptoe.

A white-faced she-devil of vengeance, Lotus Burma said, "Where are those diamonds?"

"Overboard!"

"Hoist him up!"

The four men heaved on the rope. They hauled until Peter's feet were dangling three feet off the steel deck.

The octopus woman cried, "When you are ready to talk, I will be ready to listen. In a half hour, my friend, I think you will become quite talkative."

But Peter, for reasons of his own, thought otherwise. From a friend, one Dekka, a Tibetan who had been schooled in the ways of Yogism, he had learned priceless tricks. He had learned the mastery of pain. He had learned that process of mental concentration whereby he could, when he wished, deaden pain in any part of his body. He could, if he wished, render himself totally unconscious for hours at a time. He might, it was true, suffer some after-effects from this form of torture, but Lotus Burma could not—if he willed otherwise—wring from him the answer she wanted.

She did not stay long. She left to supervise the thorough search of the ship. The four men made the rope fast to a cleat and departed, too. Left alone, he wondered if he had hidden the diamonds successfully. Such a minute search made him believe that, in time, the black metal box must be found.

THE Langpo rolled heavily in the swell. Fog poured down upon her, as if from an inexhaustible vat. It was so thick that, as he twisted at the end of the rope, he could never see farther than fifty feet in any direction. The bridge was only twenty or twenty-five feet away from him. At times, the three figures on the bridge were completely obscured. And since early this morning—at dawn—the fog whistle had stopped.

Why? He could not believe that it had been out of order for such a length of time.

The steady rolling of the ship caused him to swing. He swung from side to side, in greater and greater arcs, like

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a pendulum. The pain in his thumbs was becoming intense. He brought his mind to bear on it. And as the pain crept down his arms and flowed, like a fiery liquid, into his shoulders, he sent numbness into those areas, too. He endured no actual pain, only a slight discomfort, and, with this, a certain cloudiness of mind which always accompanied his use of Yogism.

But his brain was sufficiently clear so that he was aware of a new and puzzling mystery; the Langpo was proceeding through the fog at unabated speed. She was—or should have been—close to that stretch of the South China Sea known for centuries to mariners as the Jaws of Hell—that feared and hated spot where stout ships vanished with their crews and left not the slightest trace.

Peter recalled the fantastic legends he had heard of the great whirlpool—the silent maelstrom which drew the most powerful ship into its center and sucked it down to the ooze of unsounded depths.

He had never taken stock in that superstition. Yet he wondered why this ship was maneuvering so erratically. These were certainly dangerous waters. Not far from here, to the south, was the Paracels Reef—most dangerous reef in the world. He had been in these waters many times, and he had never known ship officers to take the chances these men were taking.

He presently became aware of a new development. Distantly, through the fog, he heard the muffled warning voices of other ships. One, a deep, triple-throated voice, undoubtedly that of a large ship, was, to Peter, uncomfortably close on the port bow. There were two other ships off to starboard.

One of these ships, with a thin, husky whistle, grew closer while the other two were gradually left astern. Then he saw that more men were gathered on the bridge. Now, there were at least ten men on the bridge. A group of them clustered on each wing, staring into the fog toward the ship with the thin, hoarse whistle. Of minor interest was the fact that all of these men were wearing dark glasses—glasses of a curious amber-violet tint, and he wondered if these strangely colored lenses enabled the men to see better in the fog.

Peter now observed that the dozens of men were being herded along the decks. Other men, presumably officers, were giving them some kind of instructions. And presently all these men began to disappear. Some went into cabins. Others went into holds.

It was baffling and somehow sinister. And the growing nearness of the thin, husky whistle made Peter growingly uneasy. Why did this ship not sound her whistle?

SIX men came along the deck toward him, dragging along a strange looking machine. It consisted of powerful springs and long steel levers. There were two steel arms mounted upon a metal plate in a parallel position and about eight feet apart. To each of these arms was attached with thin wire the two ends of a great mass of iron chain.

He studied it for some time until he reasoned that it was a crude but rather clever form of catapult—a double catapult for hurling a great length of chain. But he could not guess its purpose.

A suspicion stole into his mind, but he rejected it as fanciful, grotesque. Yet the thin, hoarse whistle of that steamer off the port bow was closer

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each time it sounded. And he was now aware that the Langpo had checked her speed.

There would be, he was certain, a collision. It seemed unavoidable. At any instant, he would see the vague bulk of the unknown steamer loom up out of the fog. And he would be at the focal point of the wreck!

When the unseen ship was so close that his very flesh quivered and danced to the vibration of her whistle, the Langpo's whistle uttered a sharp, short blast.

It was instantly answered by a series of panic toots—the danger signal of the sea. The Langpo should have reversed her engines instantly. But she did not reverse. She crept steadily, stealthily on—toward that frantically tooting whistle.

He could picture the surprise, the consternation of her crew—having heard no answering whistle all this time, now to hear that single, mysterious blast. It would throw them into a panic. And Peter allowed that insistent suspicion to swarm in upon him now. He believed he was at the verge of solving that old, old mystery of the sea—being shown the truth about the dreaded, legendary Jaws of Hell.

He had hardly formed this thought in his head when things began to happen. Before he could shout a warning, the Langpo's whistle began to blow steadily. And at that instant, out of the fog, the strange ship loomed—almost bow on!

Peter caught a glimpse of the name on those squat, strong bows—the City of Amoy. He knew this ship. She was one of the obscure little tramps in the China trade of which the world would never hear unless, perhaps, she vanished and became another mystery of the seas—a nine-day wonder. Ships like the City of Amoy quietly went about their work, carrying rich cargoes from east to west and west to east.

As the squat, wide bows of the tramp went past, Peter saw men frantically waving from the bridge. Other men were running about. That lone blast from the Langpo's brazen throat had, as he had suspected, reduced her personnel to confusion and panic.

But there was no confusion aboard the Langpo. Her tremendous crew acted swiftly, efficiently—with the skill and sureness of long practice.

PETER watched the six men below him with that strange, crude catapult. He watched them aim it. One of them touched a trigger. And the purpose of that ingenious machine was promptly explained. With a smashing sound of released springs, the chain went sailing up and off the deck, writhing through the fog like a long and amazing snake.

Its target was the wireless antenna. And it found that target with swift and incredible accuracy. As if it were a giant's hand, it snatched the wires from the masts, and the broken wires became entangled with rigging and funnel guys, effectively short-circuiting the wireless machine and rendering it useless.

Meanwhile the two ships had come close alongside. The whistle of the Langpo continued to fill the fogbound world with an unceasing blast of sound.

What followed was nightmare. The sides of the two ships ground softly together. Smoke shot with sparks rose in clouds from friction. Grappling hooks were thrown from the Langpo, fore and aft. And simultaneously, the tremendous crew of the Langpo went into action. They

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swarmed from hatches and doorways, yelling and shrieking. In a dark wave, they went over the rail and aboard the doomed City of Amoy. Each of them carried a knife—a long knife like a cutlass, but shorter, with more of a curve to it—the wickedest knife Peter had ever seen. More wicked than any dirk. More wicked than any Malay *parang*.

But in the vanguard went ment with carbines, firing as they went. Now—not till now—the Langpo stopped whistling. And in place of that strenuous blast came the yells and cries of terrified men.

Taken in a state of cleverly induced panic, taken completely by surprise, the crew of the City of Amoy offered little resistance. Peter saw the gray horde sweep upon those luckless men. And not only men, but women. Two young women, presumably passengers, came running out of a doorway. Howling idiots seized them—seized them by the hair and slashed their throats.

A man was climbing into the rigging. A swarm of the gray men pursued him up the shrouds. They overtook him. He was dragged down and his throat was cut.

Aft, some of the engineroom crew were resisting. Men ran into cabins and came out with pistols. One of them had a rifle. They stood their ground, firing into the invaders, but they did not resist long. They vanished beneath a surging tide of the murderers.

Twisting grotesquely at the end of the rope, Peter felt weak and sick. Fury swept him in hot waves. Yet beneath these surges of wrath was a feeling of stunned amazement. He had been a privileged witness to the answer to a riddle of the ages. With his own eyes he was seeing what happened to the ships—and had been happening to them for centuries—the ships which were so mysteriously lost with all hands in the Jaws of Hell! Or so he believed.

Everything—or almost everything—was explained now. Everything, in fact, but the greatest riddle of all. Who were these gray-faced, idiot-eyed assassins? Of what race?

His speculations were forgotten as he watched the systematic way the gray men went about the rest of their work. While some of them bound heavy pieces of iron to their victims and threw them overboard, others went about gutting the ship. Gangplanks were laid between the two ships. Winches hissed, rattled and sang. Cargo hoists went into play. And the cargo of the stricken ship was swiftly transferred to the holds of the Langpo.

When the last of her cargo and stores had been transferred, her lifeboats and liferafts—and all similar objects which might leave a clue upon the water—were chopped up, reduced to kindling. All this débris, in splinters, was dumped into the gutted holds.

Crude bombs were now lowered into all holds. The City of Amoy was beginning perceptibly to settle. Her seacocks, Peter suspected, had been opened.

The grappling hooks were thrown off, and the piratical crew came swarming back aboard the Langpo. Smoke in black clouds belched from the hatches of the doomed ship.

The Langpo backed away, but Peter saw the end of it before the City of Amoy was lost in the fog—lost forever. Great explosions sent fragments of wood and metal spraying upward through the hatches, and the tramp began to settle rapidly by the stern.

As he watched, she rolled to star-

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board—rolled until water flowed into the hatches. She settled more swiftly then.

Another vast explosion told that one or more of her boilers had blown up.

The City of Amoy plunged, stern first, with a great slobbering and gurgling and rushing of air—a ship's death rattle. And then the enveloping fog closed in.

For perhaps forty minutes, the Langpo lingered in that neighborhood, with engines stopped. Then she got under way.

To Peter Moore, it had been one of the most incredible performances he had ever witnessed. Events had taken place so swiftly that it was hard to believe they had actually taken place. From start to finish, that surprise attack, with its swift, ruthless slaughtering of those innocent men and women, the looting of the cargo holds, the firing and sinking of the prey, had consumed something less than two hours. He had never seen men work with such speed, such sureness, such precision. They had acted with the mechanical certainty of robots.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Tickled to Death

EVERY one has heard the expression: "Tickled to Death." It originated in China several hundred years before the discovery of America.

During the year the Chinese armies would make war on other places and capture prisoners. Once every year there was a big feast for the Emperor, which lasted one month. The prisoners were divided up and a certain number were brought in each day. They were tied on a cross erected especially for this purpose. A man in a black mask then took something and tickled the prisoner's feet until he died laughing. While this proceeding was going on, the people kept chanting: "Tickled to Death, Tickled to Death, Tickled to Death," until the prisoner died.

R. H. Collard.

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Frozen with fear, Karen waited

Novelette—Complete

Black Panther

By JUDSON P. PHILIPS

Author of "Fence-top Duel," etc.

Fifty savage jungle beasts loose in a tranquil Catskill artist colony—and the man who freed them was a murderer

CHAPTER I.

WILD ANIMALS.

OLD Adam Barth's eyes twinkled as he looked at the three guests sitting at the luncheon table on the terrace of his magnificent house. Steve Blake and Karen Marsh were in love with each other, and it pleased old Adam to have them around to remind him of his own lost youth. Lucien Stone, gray, fifty-five, with a deeply lined face, was a newcomer in Stockford, and as such old Adam had to find out about him. Stockford was an artist colony, and the grim-faced Mr. Stone, who walked with a pronounced limp, was certainly not an artist.

"I don't see anything queer about it," old Adam said.

Karen Marsh laughed. "It doesn't seem queer to us, Mr. Barth," she said. "We're quite used to it by now. But I don't blame Mr. Stone for feeling a little odd about having cages full of man-eating wild animals located so close to his house."

"You must admit, sir," Steve grinned, "that you hardly expect to find lions and tigers located in a peaceful Catskill village."

"But they're pets!" old Adam pro-

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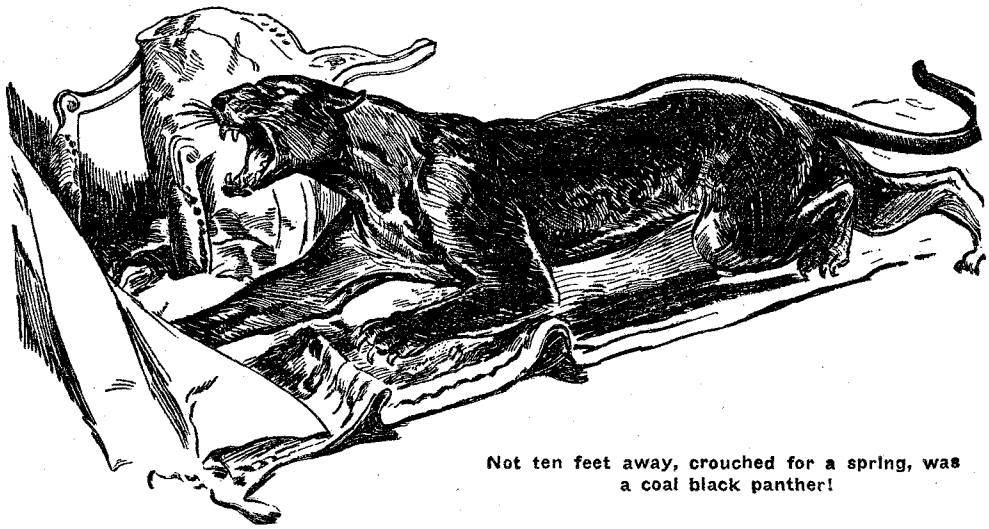
tested. "I like having 'em around. I spent all my life hunting animals for circuses, and if I couldn't hear a lion roar once in a while I'd shrivel up and die. I sleep better for the sound and the smell of 'em."

them . . . they hate you! I still think it's a mighty queer sort of fad."

Old Adam chuckled. "Mr. Stone, you have a passion for opera. Right in the middle of this hot weather you drive a hundred miles to New York



Not ten feet away, crouched for a spring, was a coal black panther!

Mr. Lucien Stone regarded the ash on the end of his cigar, a tight smile on his thin lips. "I walked between those rows of cages on my way here to lunch," he said. "They looked to me to be about as mean and keyed up a lot of 'pets' as I ever laid eyes on."

"Hot weather makes 'em cantankerous," said old Adam. "It's just as good to stay away from 'em during the month of August."

"What would happen if they ever got loose, Mr. Barth?" Karen asked.

Old Adam sipped his mint julep. "They'd raise almighty hell!" he said grimly. "But you needn't worry about that, Miss Marsh. They're securely padlocked in those cages, and Griswold, my keeper, examines the locks twice a day."

"But what fun do you get out of them?" Mr. Stone asked. "You can't play with them . . . you can't pet

and a hundred miles back to hear some fifth rate summer company perform in a stuffy theater, when you could be sitting in the cool of your own front porch looking at the stars. That seems just as queer to me, sir."

"I suppose it does," agreed Stone. "You see, I never could afford the money or the time to hear opera when I was a kid. Now I can't get enough of it, good or bad."

"And Blake, here, is an artist," said old Adam. "You somehow wouldn't expect a big, husky looking specimen like him to paint pictures! But he does—and damn good ones, if I know anything about it!" He chuckled again. "Music for one of you and painting for the other. But for me it's wild animals. I've hunted 'em, and brought 'em back alive to this country for thirty years. I just have to have 'em around."

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Steve Blake stood up. "The queerest thing of all," he said, "is that I must leave this charming company. I started a picture this morning down in your south field, Mr. Barth. It's still sitting on its easel down there, and I've got such a good start on it I want to do a little more before the light fails. See you to-night, Karen?" he asked.

"Come for supper if you're not too hungry," said Karen.

Steve left the others and, whistling, made his way down across Adam Barth's lawn toward the field where his canvas stood. As he had told Adam, he had a good start on this landscape, and he thought it had promise. He felt very pleased with life at that moment. And then, as he came up to his picture, he suddenly stopped whistling and stared at the canvas in amazement. Some one had deliberately, and painstakingly, wiped out the entire right hand half of the picture while he was gone. When he examined it more closely he saw that evidently an attempt had been made to paint it out with black paint, and then the person had taken the rag and smeared out the entire half of the painting!

"Well, what the hell!" he said softly.

CHAPTER II.

OPENED CAGES.

STEVE BLAKE tamped down the tobacco in his pipe and leaned back comfortably in the steamer chair on Karen Marsh's porch. She, too, was a painter, which was another bond between them—if any were needed. It was usually at this point in the evening that Steve proposed, but tonight he sat frowning silently, blowing puffs of blue smoke at a persistent mosquito.

"That business about my picture has got me licked," he said finally.

"Some stupid act of vandalism," said Karen. "It's a rotten shame, darling."

Steve clicked his teeth against the stem of his pipe. "But why only half the picture?" he said. "And why so careful about it? If it was some fresh kid, he would have messed up the whole thing. But this was just half—and very, very carefully erased! And if it was someone who wanted to be mean he could have gone to my studio and destroyed something that was finished. This was hardly beyond the sketch stage. There doesn't seem to be any possible reason for it."

"There's hardly any reason for anything," said Karen lightly. "For instance, there's no reason for my wanting to take a walk. But I do . . . up to the knoll to watch the moon rise over the lake."

"*Everything* I do has a reason," said Steve. "Because you want me to do it. Let's go."

So they sat on the knoll and watched the moon rise—and Steve proposed, and Karen said, "Some day," as usual, and then they started home.

"Old Adam's pets seem to be raising particular hell to-night," Steve remarked, as they walked slowly along the road toward Karen's house. A fierce roaring and snarling split the hot stillness of the evening.

"It sounds as though they were fighting amongst themselves," said Karen.

"They're all in separate cages."

They turned into Karen's driveway and went up onto the porch of her cottage. "How about a Tom Collins?" Karen asked. "It's hot, even when you walk so slowly."

"Swell idea. I'll help." And Steve

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sauntered into the house after her—sauntered, and then, across the threshold, stopped abruptly, the hair suddenly standing up on the back of his neck, the palms of his hands clammy. There was no mistaking it! He would have known it anywhere. The smell of the *big cat! Inside this house!*

"Karen!" he said sharply.

"Yes, darling?" She paused at the kitchen door.

Steve moistened his lips. He mustn't frighten her. He might be mistaken. But he wasn't. *He knew it!* "I—I'll make the drinks," he said. She mustn't go out into that dark kitchen. It was a one-story bungalow, and he could see both the living room and the bedroom from where he stood. He knew that the smell of a lion will stick behind him for a long time — strongly. It might have been and gone. But there was still the kitchen.

He strode across the room to the door of the kitchen, actually pulling Karen rather roughly away from the door. The light switch was just around the other side, and he reached with his right hand—standing to one side—and switched on the light. He expected almost anything. But there was nothing. The kitchen was empty.

There were little beads of sweat on Steve's forehead as he turned away.

"Steve! What on earth's the matter?" Karen was staring at him in astonishment.

He gripped her arms very tightly. "Listen, darling. I don't want to frighten you, but—"

HE was interrupted by a car coming to a screeching stop in the driveway, and some one came running up on the porch and hammered on the door. Steve called out and a young man, his face the color of ashes, burst into the room carrying a shotgun. It was Bill Medford, a young artist neighbor.

"I thought you'd be here, Blake," he panted. "My God, there's hell to pay! Barth's animals . . . they've broken out of their cages! The butler phoned . . . said he didn't know if old Adam was safe or not . . . didn't dare leave the room where the telephone is."

Steve's arm was very tight around Karen's shoulders. "That's what I was about to tell you, Karen," he said quietly. "There's been a lion or a tiger in this house." He turned to Medford. "We'll take Karen in your car to your house. She'll be safer there. Then we must spread the alarm."

"My brother and Jess Barnes are at that already," said Medford. "I—I thought," he added, his teeth chattering, "we should go up to Barth's and make sure the old man is all right."

"Right," said Steve grimly.

They drove Karen to Medford's house and there Steve picked up another gun and a flash light. Medford's brother was frantically phoning, and told them that Barnes had set out in his coupé to warn those people who didn't have telephones.

"Steve, darling! You'll be careful," Karen pleaded.

"Don't worry," he said coolly. "They can't *all* have broken out. Probably just one on the loose."

He and Medford got in the car and headed for Barth's place. As they turned in the driveway Steve's blood turned cold once more, for the headlights of the car showed three catlike shapes slinking across the road.

"Hurry!" he said tensely to Medford.

As they drew up at the house the headlights shone down the lane be-

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tween rows of cages. Steve stared with his eyes popping out of his head. "My God, Medford, do you see what I see? Every single one of those cage doors is open. They aren't broken open either. *Somebody's deliberately turned those animals lose!*"

But young Medford was not looking at the cages. He was gripping the wheel of the car, white knuckled, his eyes bulging. Something lay on the road in front of them, something very still, something that might have been a man.

Steve wrenched open the door of the car. "Come on," he rapped.

Medford shook his head. "God help me, Blake, I haven't got the nerve. Why, those devils—"

"Cover me from the car, then," said Steve grimly. "And if you see an animal, shoot! And shoot straight!" He jumped out of the car and went to that figure in the road—knelt beside it. Cold, paralyzing horror seized him as he saw the mangled remains of a man—torn and ripped to pieces, lying in a darkening pool of his own blood. It was Griswold, the keeper. He was past any help.

Steve glanced toward the house, and saw, on the steps of the terrace, another figure . . . just a black hulk in the darkness . . . moving ever so slightly. He raised his gun, and then quickly lowered it. It wasn't an animal. It was a man—a man crawling up the steps with legs that dragged, horribly useless. Steve sprang forward to him, and a second later old Adam Barth was in his arms.

Steve choked back the exclamation that crowded up. Old Adam, his face gouged and torn, one arm mangled as though it had been put through a meat chopper, a dreadful gaping wound in his throat. His faded blue eyes were tortured, straining—his lips moved.

"My God, sir, what happened?" Steve asked hoarsely.

The withered lips moved, flecked with blood. Old Adam was whispering feebly. Steve lowered his head.

"The—Black—Panther!" old Adam muttered. "The—Black—Panther!"

And then he lay very still in Steve's arms. He was dead.

CHAPTER III.

MURDER!

STEVE picked up the old man and carried him into the house. He had just stretched out the body on a couch in the hall when he heard shots outside. Fearing for Medford's safety, he picked up his gun and started for the door, only to see another car come up the driveway. A moment later two State troopers and Medford joined him.

"We nailed a tiger down near the entrance gates," said one of the troopers excitedly. "Where's Mr. Barth? What the hell's happened here, anyhow?"

Steve pointed to the figure on the couch. "The old man is dead," he said gravely. "Also his keeper. Torn to shreds."

"I'm Sergeant Cullen of the State Police," said the trooper. "Who are you and how do you happen to be here?"

Steve explained. "This is very much more serious, sergeant," he added, "than it would appear at first. This isn't the result of an accident. I got a glimpse of the animal cages. They've all been deliberately opened! Some one set these animals free on purpose."

The sergeant emitted a low whistle. "By God, that's murder!" he said.

"And there'll be more," said Steve,

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"unless every householder for miles around is warned of the danger. There were forty or fifty of those brutes in the cages. They can cover a lot of territory."

"We've got men patrolling the roads," said the sergeant, "and going to every single house. But we've got to start a hunt for these animals."

Steve shook his head. "It's your business, sergeant, but if I were you I'd wait for daylight. You'll want a pretty large force of men, properly armed, and you want to see what you're doing. Ever hunt big game?"

"Nothing bigger than fox," said the sergeant dryly.

"A lion can cover a hundred yards in a matter of split seconds," said Steve. "Unless you're a damn good shot and you can see him coming you might as well hang up your cue then and there. If I were you I'd phone to New York for men who understand how to hunt these beasts."

The sergeant nodded. "I guess you're right, Mr. Blake. By the way, was old Barth able to explain what happened before he died?"

Steve shook his head. "He just said something about a black panther. Must have been the animal that attacked him. They're the fiercest killers of all, you know."

Steve spent the night in Barth's house. He found the butler barricaded in the library, from where he had phoned for help. He couldn't tell what had happened. The animals had suddenly made a tremendous uproar. The butler had got one look out of the window, seen them on the loose, and locked himself in the library.

Old Adam had a large collection of big game hunting rifles and guns, and Steve spent a good deal of the night cleaning and putting these weapons in order for the next day. As he worked, one question insistently flashed before his mind. Why should any one have done this? How had any one dared do it? Each one of those cages had to be unlocked separately. What possible purpose could there have been in it? There could be no certainty that any special person would be harmed by the animals, and a grave possibility that the criminal himself would be slaughtered. It didn't make sense.

HE finally got a little sleep and at dawn Sergeant Cullen, four or five picked troopers, and three other men from New York arrived at the house to start the hunt. One of these men was Godfrey Welling, the famous explorer and big game hunter, and he took charge.

"There's to be no question of recapturing these animals . . . you want them killed?" Welling asked the sergeant.

"As dead as possible," said the sergeant grimly.

Steve was never to forget that day. Before they started they learned that six of the big cats had been killed by armed villagers at different places. But Welling was convinced that most of them would have taken to the wooded mountainsides, and it was on this theory that they worked. They moved up the mountain, spread out in a line of skirmishers, guns ready, nerves taut. They had not been under way ten minutes before Godfrey Welling brought down a snarling lioness. But after that there was little action. The sun beat down on them hotly through the trees; every clump of bushes seemed to be bristling with danger. Yet when noon came they had bagged exactly three animals. It was rather discouraging progress.

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It was along in the middle of the afternoon that Steve found himself separated from the others. He could hear them thrashing through the brush, but at the moment he could see no one. Then suddenly, not fifty yards away from him in a little clearing, Steve saw a striped jungle killer—a huge, crouching beast, its baleful eyes fixed directly on him. Steve stood stock still and very slowly raised his gun to his shoulder. At the same instant the tiger began to move forward, slowly at first, treading softly. Coolly Steve pulled the trigger—and nothing happened! For a second he was like a man in a dream whose feet are irrevocably fastened to the ground. Then he sprang sideways for the protection of a huge maple tree. At that moment the tiger charged.

Steve frantically ejected the shell that had refused to fire . . . raised his gun . . . the tiger was in the air. He pulled the trigger once more . . . there was a burst of flame . . . and the tiger struck him. One slashing claw knocked him flat on his back, and only the partial protection of the tree saved him from receiving the full impact of that murderous charge.

He lay on the ground, a nasty tear in his arm, waiting for the tiger to finish the job. There was no chance to reload that double-barreled elephant gun, no chance to get away. But the tiger was thrashing feebly in the bushes.

Very slowly Steve got to his feet. As he picked up his gun he heard some one walking through the bushes. He called out. There was no answer. Then, for an instant, he caught a glimpse of a man . . . *a man moving hurriedly away!*

"Wait!" Steve shouted.

The man broke into a run and disappeared without Steve ever being able to identify him. Steve stared after him in puzzled amazement. A man, certainly not one of the hunters, had been a witness to his close call, and had deliberately gone off without offering assistance or disclosing his identity.

Welling and a couple of the others joined him presently and heard his strange story. The big game hunter was incredulous. "You must have been mistaken," he said.

"It was a man," said Steve grimly. "A man who didn't want us to know he had any interest in this business. I'd bet several brand new hats he could have explained how those cages were opened!"

It was along about dusk when the hunting party got back to Barth's place with a record of having bagged eleven of the escaped animals. Only three more had been shot around the town since morning, which meant that twenty or twenty-five of them were still at large. Steve was exhausted, and his arm pained him severely, although the tiger's claws had inflicted only a surface wound. Young Medford was waiting for him at the house.

"Came to drive you home," he said. "Incidentally, Karen has gone back to her own house. She felt she would be as safe there as anywhere."

Steve's lips tightened. "I wish you hadn't let her go," he said. "I'll run down and make certain she's all right, but I'm coming back here as soon as I've cleaned up a bit."

"Take my car, then, and I'll wait here," said Medford. "I'd like to hear about the day's hunting."

THERE were only the last vestiges of daylight as Steve drove Medford's car along the road to Karen's house. As he approached it he

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saw a thin spiral of blue smoke curling up from the chimney, but no lights in the windows. He frowned. She should have been warned to keep her lights burning brightly after dusk, for it would serve to keep any stray animal at a distance. He turned into her driveway, stopped the car, and climbed out, still carrying the gun.

"Hi, Karen!" he called.

There was no reply. He wasn't disturbed. Possibly she had gone back to the Medfords' as darkness came on. He wished, however, that she wouldn't run the risk of wandering around alone. He walked up onto the porch wearily, just to have a look inside to make sure. She might have left a note for him. Then suddenly, as he stood by the screen door, the thing he saw froze him with horror. In one corner of the bedroom, hiding behind the upturned iron spring of the bed, was Karen, her face white as death, an expression of strangling fear in her staring eyes. Not ten feet from her, his tail lashing viciously back and forth, crouched for a spring, was a coal black panther!

Steve knew better than to cry out or make any sound. He knew that Karen's life depended on his accurate shooting—and shooting before that black devil on the rug made up his mind to attack.

"Karen, you mustn't move, darling!" he prayed softly. "You mustn't move!"

Very slowly he raised the gun to his shoulder, drawing a careful bead on the panther. At the same instant the beast turned its head and saw him. It was suddenly a flying black streak in the dusky gloom. It sprang, not at Karen or Steve, but straight at the closed living room window. There was a crashing of glass, a splintering of wood, and the panther was gone.

Steve sprang off the porch, his gun ready, but the panther was already thrashing its way off through the woods. And then he saw another figure, the figure of a man. In the dim light he recognized him as the same person he had seen a few hours before in the woods, the man who had refused to lift a finger when the tiger was attacking him. Steve could not see his face, but the hat, the outline of the figure, were the same.

"Stand right where you are!" Steve rapped, swinging his gun into line.

The man turned and started to run. Steve pulled the trigger of his gun, and it roared and reëchoed in the twilight stillness. He must have missed, for the man went plunging off through the bushes.

"Stop, or I'll blow your brains out!" Steve shouted.

But the man kept running. Steve fired and the man took a headlong fall, but he scrambled to his feet immediately and went on. He was gone before Steve could reload his gun. Steve stood peering into the darkness after this sinister man who seemed to be present at these critical moments with no idea of lending assistance.

He dared not leave Karen to follow, now.

He turned back to the house to find Karen still sitting on the floor behind the upturned bed, her face sunk in her hands, sobbing. Very gently he took her in his arms and lifted her to her feet.

"It's all right now, darling. He's gone—and I won't leave you again, angel. I promise you that."

"It was terrible," the girl sobbed. "That animal crouched there for an hour, Steve. And then—then a man came and looked in the window. I couldn't see his face, but he stood there

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watching. And—and he didn't make a move to help me!"

Steve's teeth gritted hard together. "Some day," he said softly, "I'm going to catch up with that guy, and when I do, God help him!"

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW THEORY.

IT was about nine o'clock when Steve got back to Barth's house that night, after returning Karen to the Medfords and getting himself cleaned up a bit. As he came into the big entrance hall where Sergeant Cullen had established his headquarters Steve saw a figure that brought a smile of pleasure to his lips.

"Johnny Tyson! You old so-and-so!"

Tyson gripped his hand warmly. They had been very close, these two, in past years when Steve was cartoonist for a big New York daily and Johnny had been a promising young reporter. Tyson was still in the newspaper business, star feature writer for the *Morning Standard,* with a reputation of having one of the sharpest noses for a criminal in the country. On more occasions than they might have cared to admit, the New York police department had been indebted to Tyson for some essential clue, or piece of reasoning, in a critical case.

A cigarette dangled between Tyson's lips, and his hat was pushed carelessly back on his head. "We've been waiting for you, Steve, old son. What's your slant on this? You were a friend of Barth's, weren't you?"

Steve nodded. "But before I give you any slants, I've got something to tell Cullen." Briefly he told the sergeant of the strange man who had twice fled when Steve had discovered him.

"You couldn't identify him, Mr. Blake?" the sergeant asked.

Steve shook his head. "I can't give you any description that will help," he said. "Medium height, black felt hat, dark suit . . . and he can run like the devil! Maybe I'd know him if I saw him again, maybe not."

"The thing's incredible!" said a hard, cold voice. For the first time Steve noticed that Mr. Lucien Stone was among those present. "That a man should have seen Miss Marsh in such a terrible predicament and done nothing about it!" He limped slowly across to Steve. "Surely, if it was any one who lives in Stockford, you would have recognized him."

Steve shrugged. "I only got a fleeting glimpse of him the first time; he was running through the woods. Tonight, at Miss Marsh's, it was almost dark. He was scarcely more than an outline."

"Did you notice whether or not he was armed?" Johnny Tyson asked.

"He wasn't carrying any kind of a rifle," said Steve. "Of course, he might have had a revolver on him without my knowing it."

"I shouldn't think any one in the community would be wandering around without some means of protecting himself," said Tyson dryly. "Not with twenty-five or more killers floating around loose."

SERGEANT CULLEN slammed his fist down on the table behind which he was sitting. "There's something a hell of a lot more important than just catching these animals," he said. "You were right, Mr. Blake, about their having been purposely freed. Every one of those

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cages was fastened with a padlock, and every one of those padlocks has been opened—with a key."

"Who had keys?" Lucien Stone asked.

"We found a bunch of keys which evidently belonged to Griswold, the keeper, lying near one of the open cages," said the sergeant. "We found a duplicate set in the desk drawer in Barth's study. It seems logical to assume that Griswold's keys were used."

"That he used 'em himself, eh?" suggested Stone.

Johnny Tyson shook his head. "If Griswold had any reason for letting 'em out he would have managed to take care of himself. But he was killed horribly. Of course, he might have made a slip. But why should he have done it?"

"There's no possible reason," said Steve flatly. "Old Adam was like a father to him, was his benefactor. I think Griswold would have given his life for old Adam."

"For that matter, why should any one turn them loose?" Tyson asked. "What was to be gained?"

"If some one hated Mr. Barth," said Lucien Stone thoughtfully, "they might have seen this as a way of getting him."

"It doesn't make sense," said Tyson. "The chances against the animals getting Barth were tremendous. He knew how dangerous they were. He had all kinds of guns and . . . By God!" Tyson interrupted himself. He looked at Steve excitedly. "You found Barth, didn't you, Steve?"

"Yes."

"Did he have a gun? Was there one lying anywhere near him?"

"No," said Steve. "I noticed that particularly. In fact, I went over his armory later and there wasn't a gun missing."

Tyson looked at the sergeant. "Can you imagine, Cullen," he asked, "Adam Barth rushing out into the midst of a lot of escaped killers without first arming himself? He knew how dangerous they were. He would have been the last person in the world to run that risk. If I were you, sergeant, I'd order an immediate autopsy on Adam Barth."

"But why?" asked the sergeant.

"Suppose he was shot, stabbed, or killed in any way by somebody who summoned him outdoors . . . *before the animals were free?* What better way would there be for covering up such a murder than turning the animals loose and letting them tear Barth's body to pieces?"

There was a moment's silence before Steve spoke up. "You're forgetting one thing," he said slowly. "As Barth was dying he said to me, 'The Black Panther.' He said it twice. I don't see any other way of interpreting that statement than that it was the panther that got him."

"Perhaps," said Tyson, crushing out his cigarette in an ash tray on the table. "But if Barth rushed out of the house because he knew the animals were free, why didn't he arm himself? I tell you, it doesn't make sense!"

CHAPTER V.

"WHO PROFITS?"

IT was Lucien Stone who put them off on a new track. "Barth was a very wealthy man," he pointed out. "Who profits by his death? Who inherits his fortune? It seems to me that is something we should know."

Old Adam's butler put them on that

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track. Barth's will was in his desk drawer. Tyson found it and read it. It was very brief and to the point. Barth's entire fortune and his collection of animals was willed to one Robert Carter, professor of biology at Columbia University, "the money to be used for the advancement of scientific research as my friend Carter deems wisest."

"Why, Carter has just been visiting Barth," said Lucien Stone. "He left day before yesterday, after having stayed for a week. He had every chance to familiarize himself with the set-up here. By Jove, Mr. Blake, perhaps we are getting on the trail of your mystery man!"

It was Tyson who phoned to headquarters in New York asking that Carter be apprehended and brought to Stockford. Half an hour later headquarters reported that Carter had been found at his home and was willingly accompanying an inspector to the scene of the crime.

Things were at a standstill until Robert Carter and his escort arrived, about two in the morning.

Carter was a serious, spectacled young man in his middle thirties, who seemed horrified when he learned what had happened.

"I—I hadn't seen the papers," he said brokenly. "Poor old Adam! Why, only yesterday—"

"Never mind that, Mr. Carter," Cullen cut in grimly. "Where were you last night, say about nine o'clock on?"

"That's quite easy," said Carter. "I was at a meeting of the Smithsonian Society. We had a dinner at seven thirty and I was in the company of my friends there till considerably after midnight."

"You won't be offended if we check on that, Mr. Carter?" asked Tyson dryly.

"Not at all."

TWENTY minutes later Tyson had finished some elaborate telephoning. He smiled at Carter. "Your alibi is perfect," he confessed. "Not only for the time these animals were loosed, but also for the entire day to-day. Steve, your mystery man is certainly not Professor Carter."

"Mystery man?" asked Carter, puzzled.

He was told about the man Steve had seen. "You see," Tyson explained, "you are the only beneficiary under Barth's will, Mr. Carter. That is why we suspected you."

"But Mr. Barth merely appointed me executor. That is to say, the money was to be for scientific research. It was left outright to me to avoid legal complications. I might add, gentlemen, that if you were to communicate with my bankers you would discover that I am in no financial straits of any sort."

"Your alibi is enough for us," said Cullen. "You couldn't have loosed those animals and been a hundred miles away in New York at the same time."

Carter was rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "There's one thing that puzzles me," he said. "That remark you attribute to Mr. Barth when he was dying. You're sure of it, Mr. Blake?"

"He said it twice," said Steve. "'The Black Panther.'"

"The reason it puzzles me," said Carter, "is because there was *no black panther in Mr. Barth's collection!*"

"But I saw it this afternoon with my own eyes!" Steve protested.

Carter shook his head doggedly. "I can't help that, Mr. Blake. There was no black panther in the collection. That I can swear to. I visited Mr. Barth

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here for a week and saw *all* the animals many times. I tell you emphatically, gentlemen, there was no b l a c k panther!"

For a moment no one spoke. Johnny Tyson's eyes were very bright. "Of course, he might have received it the day you left," he said.

"I doubt it very much," said Carter. "He said nothing about it to me. Furthermore, his interest in these animals lay in the fact that he had captured them himself. As you very well know, he had been on no hunting expeditions for a year. And besides that, every cage was occupied! I tell you, there was no black panther. Mr. Blake must have been mistaken in what he saw this afternoon. He must have been mistaken in what Barth said when he was dying, and jumped at conclusions, in the excitement, when he saw that animal in Miss Marsh's cottage."

"How about it, Steve?" Tyson asked.

"I was not mistaken," said Steve. "Barth referred very distinctly, twice, to the black panther! And the animal I saw this afternoon could have been nothing else. I'll take my gospel oath to that."

At that moment a car pulled up in front of the house and one of Cullen's troopers came in. He was white as a sheet and his lips twitched nervously.

"There's been another tragedy, sergeant," he said hoarsely. "Mrs. Irene Jackson, who lives just down the road from here, has been killed—torn to pieces by one of these animals. She's been dead for a long time, sir. Since late this afternoon the doctor thinks."

"Who is Mrs. Jackson?" Tyson asked.

"A newcomer to town," said Steve. "I haven't met her. She's only been here for a couple of weeks."

Godfrey Welling, the explorer, had listened to all the investigation without comment. Now he pulled his huge body out of a chair. "There'll be tracks around the house," he said. "Suppose I go back with your man, sergeant. Perhaps we can settle this business."

He went. Twenty minutes later he phoned the sergeant.

"Panther tracks," he said laconically. "Not the slightest doubt of it."

CHAPTER VI.

FINGERPRINTS.

JOHNNY TYSON went back to Steve's house with him that night and they snatched a little rest. Over breakfast the next morning Tyson marshalled the facts as they knew them.

"We're faced with one very definite conclusion, Steve," he said. "There is some one else in these parts who is collecting wild animals . . . at least one wild animal. Our friend the black panther has been imported here for a definite purpose by some one."

"What sort of purpose?"

"Murder," said Tyson grimly. "You know, I've been puzzled by that extraordinary fact that Barth rushed out into the midst of a bunch of raging animals without arming himself. I don't believe he did. I think what happened is quite clear now. He was called out by some one—some one he knew. And that some one is the importer of the black panther. When he was outside, the panther got him. After that, our villain turns all Barth's animals loose so that no one will guess that an outsider was responsible. I don't think he meant that any one should see the panther."

"But I saw it, Johnny."

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"Quite so. You see, there was one little slip up. Barth wasn't quite dead when you found him. He spilled the beans about the black panther to you, but none of us placed any special importance on it, assuming there had been a black panther in the collection."

Steve looked at his friend sharply. "But if the black panther is under the control of this murderer, then it must have been deliberately set on Karen! The man who looked in the window must have meant the panther to kill Karen."

"Precisely. And also Mrs. Jackson."

"But in God's name why?" Steve asked.

Johnny Tyson studied the end of his cigarette. "Don't forget that he also stood by and watched a tiger attack you in the woods without helping you. Tell me, Steve, do you and Karen know anything that nobody else knows? Something that might give the murderer away?"

"Good Lord, no!"

"Think," said Tyson earnestly. "It's the only explanation. You and Karen either know something or have seen something that would give the murderer away. You may not be aware of it consciously, but I'll bet a hat it's the answer. Think back over the last few days. Has anything unusual happened? Have you seen anything out of the way? It may not have struck you as important at the time, but it may be the key to the whole business."

"But, Johnny, if I'd seen anything I'd have remembered, wouldn't I? I'd have remembered when all this happened, at any rate."

"Think!" said Tyson grimly.

Steve looked around him a little helplessly. "There hasn't been anything," he said. "Well, as a matter of fact, something odd *did* happen to me that I told Karen about, but it can't possibly have any bearing on this business."

"What was it?" Tyson demanded.

"Why, I was painting a picture over in one of Barth's fields. I left it standing there on the easel while I went up to old Adam's for lunch. When I came back some one had deliberately wiped out half of the picture. It was simply a wise trick—somebody trying to be smart."

TYSON scowled, sucking in a deep lungful of smoke. "What were you painting?" he asked.

"Just an ordinary landscape."

"What was in the half of the picture that was wiped off?"

Steve rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Nothing special. I was painting the mountains and the lake, with part of the village in the foreground. Whoever did it tried to paint it out in black first, then they wiped the whole thing off with a paint rag."

"Have you got the canvas here?" Tyson asked. "Let's look at it."

Steve brought it out and put it down against a chair for Tyson to see. He hadn't touched it since he had come in from the field that afternoon. "It's just as I found it," he said.

Tyson studied it, frowning. "Now why the hell would any one do that? I mean destroy just half of it. Are you sure there was nothing special on that half of the picture?"

"Nothing that I recall," said Steve. "A couple of houses and barns, and the mountains and lake in the background."

Tyson looked closer at the picture. "There's a smudge of black here below the horizon line," he said. "He

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must have squeezed quite a lot of paint out of the tube. Steve, try to remember every detail of that half of the picture! There's only one possible explanation of this, if it had anything to do with the crimes. You had painted something into that picture that would be a damning record of something which might trap the murderer."

"Nuts," said Steve inelegantly. "I tell you, Johnny, the things have no connection."

"Then why did your mysterious man stand by and watch both you and Karen in danger of death without lifting a hand? I tell you, Steve, there's a tie-up here somewhere. Something in my bones tells me this is a vital link." He looked down at the open box of paints on the floor beside the picture. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. "Is that tube without the paper label on it the black that was used?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My God, Steve, did you touch it after you found out what had happened?"

"Why, I—I don't think so. But what of it?"

Tyson hurriedly took his handkerchief from his pocket. "What surface could possibly be better for retaining a fingerprint impression than that oily lead sheet?" he asked. "If you haven't handled it, the prints of the person who defaced your picture are probably on that tube. It's worth a chance, anyhow."

"But what possible good would it do you if they are?" Steve asked. "You'd have to fingerprint everybody in the community to identify them. And it wouldn't prove anything."

"Maybe, and maybe not," said Tyson. He was carefully wrapping the tube in his handkerchief. "If you did paint something in your picture that might have given the murderer away, and it was the murderer who defaced the picture, then we have him. What you've got to do, my lad, is remember what *was* in the picture. Go out to where your easel was—now! Sit there and look at that landscape until you remember every detail you painted into your picture. I'm sending this off to headquarters. See you later."

STEVE went and sat, as Tyson had directed. He sat there for almost an hour, and at the end of that time he was no wiser than he had been. Nothing was changed that he could see. There wasn't a single thing about the whole countryside that could have anything to do with the crimes.

Johnny waited impatiently to hear from New York about the fingerprints on the tube, if any. Steve joined him at Barth's, which was a sort of headquarters for police and hunters. As the day wore on reports came from Welling and his men that indicated they had rounded up all but one or two of the escaped animals.

Meanwhile Sergeant Cullen had gained some information about Mrs. Irene Jackson, the woman who had been killed by the mysterious black panther.

"She's an ex-circus queen," he told Steve and Johnny. "Used to be a famous bareback rider until about five years ago. Retired, and just bought this place down the road about a month ago. As far as I can make out she didn't know any one here."

"Just the same," said Johnny, "it *has* a link with Barth. He caught animals for circuses. She was a circus performer. It looks as though she belongs in a definite scheme of the murderer's."

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Just how definite Johnny was to learn a few minutes later. There was a long distance call for him from New York. When he rejoined Cullen and Steve his face was very grim. He sat down and deliberately lit a cigarette.

"Steve, there were prints on that tube," he said slowly. "The prints of a well known murderer—a man who is wanted badly by the police!"

"For God's sake, Johnny. Well, anyhow, it's a relief to know it's no one in Stockford."

"Wait," said Tyson, "till I tell you the story. Those prints were identified as belonging to a man named Tate Randall, who fifteen years ago murdered his wife in a little town in California. He was tried and convicted, but on the eve of his execution he somehow managed to escape. He has managed to elude capture all these years, by completely changing his identity. The New York police have warrants for his arrest, extradition papers from California, and they are very anxious for information as to his present whereabouts."

"There's nobody named Randall around here," said the sergeant.

"Naturally not," said Tyson dryly. "Randall has been somebody else for fifteen years. But I haven't told you half the story, gentlemen. Could you, do you suppose, guess at Mr. Randall's occupation at the time he murdered his wife?"

"I'll bite," said the sergeant.

"Mr. Tate Randall," said Tyson, "was an animal trainer! He was a very famous animal trainer, my friends. The reason he was so famous was because he was one of the few men who ever successfully tamed a black panther!"

"Good Lord!" Steve ejaculated.

"And that's not all," said Tyson. "Because of his success in this peculiarly difficult feat he was known and publicly referred to as 'The Black Panther'! You see the implication, Steve? When Barth lay dying in your arms he was not only referring to the animal that had killed him . . . he was referring to Mr. Tate Randall!"

"But why should this man Randall track Barth down here and kill him? Why should he have turned his panther loose on Mrs. Jackson?" Cullen asked.

TYSON inhaled on his cigarette. "Maybe he didn't track them down, sergeant. This is my theory about it, at any rate. Some one living in this peaceful little town of Stockford, under another name, is Tate Randall. After fifteen years there is very little danger of Randall's being caught unless some one recognizes him. Now we can assume that he is completely disguised, but any one who had known him fifteen years ago might penetrate that disguise, might recognize some little mannerism that he had not altered. Well, living here in Stockford were two people who might have seen through him: Barth and Mrs. Jackson. Barth, an animal hunter for the circus, may actually have supplied Randall with panthers for his act. Mrs. Jackson may have played in the same circuses with him."

"Of course," said Steve, "if they recognized him it would mean the chair for him!"

Tyson nodded. "I don't think they had actually recognized him," he said. "I think either Mrs. Jackson or Barth suspected. They may have conferred together and decided to watch this man, whoever he is. You see, it must have been like that, for Randall had plenty of time to plan a way out. He managed to import a black panther,

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train it, and finally turn it loose to kill his victims. If Barth, for example, had been certain of this man's identity, he would have notified the police at once. No, they weren't sure. And while they were watching this man, he was planning cleverly to kill them."

"But who is he?" Cullen asked.

"That is something we have to find out," said Tyson. "But he is the man who defaced your picture, Steve; the man who stood by and watched that tiger attack you; the man who set that panther on Karen Marsh."

"But why me and Karen?"

"Steve," said Tyson decisively, "you painted something in that half of your picture which might have given Tate Randall away. He happened to come along when you were gone, saw what you had painted, and then wiped it out. He knew you had told Karen, and his whole safety depends upon our not delving into what it was."

"But if there was something in the picture," said Steve, "it is still there . . . I mean in the landscape itself. I spent an hour looking this morning, but perhaps you can see something."

Tyson shook his head. "Whatever it was, you can be sure it is no longer there. Randall has removed it or changed it. What we've got to do, Steve, is go back to that spot and you've got to remember what this missing thing is. When you do remember I think we will have Mr. Tate Randall!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE MURDERER.

STEVE took Tyson down into the field where his canvas had been set up. It was about four in the afternoon and the sun was glaring bright against the waters of the distant lake. They stood for a while in silence. Finally Tyson spoke.

"It must have been something in the foreground, Steve," he said. "There would be no detail in your painting of those distant hills. It was something close at hand that had interested you sufficiently to paint in some detail. Something that you won't see if you look now. What was it?"

Steve shook his head. "No soap," he said. "There were a couple of horses down there grazing that are missing now. That's all."

"What houses or buildings were in your picture?"

"There was Karen's house there to the left; Medford's studio and Lucien Stone's barn over there to the right."

"Uh-huh." Tyson was thoughtful for a moment. "How about Karen's house? See anything about it that's different from the morning you painted it?"

Steve grinned. "I know every detail of that house, inside out. If there was anything different about it I'd know it in a minute."

"How about Medford's place. Think, Steve. There may have been an automobile there that isn't there now. There may have been something or some one in the yard that you painted into your picture."

Steve shook his head after a long pause. "Not a thing," he said.

Tyson crushed out his cigarette impatiently. "Damn it, there *has* to be something, Steve."

"I'd remember if it was a person or a car or something of that sort," said Steve. "You see, it would have involved certain technical problems that wouldn't escape my memory now. If it's anything, it's something that must have seemed quite natural at the time."

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"Well, how about Stone's barn?" Tyson asked.

Steve studied the barn for a long time, his brow puckered in a frown. "There's something," he said slowly. "Something missing, Johnny. But I'm damned if I can think what it is."

"You've got to," said Tyson grimly. "Was there some one by the barn? Was there a box or crate out in front of it? That panther had to be brought here *in* something, you know."

"You needn't worry about Stone," Steve said. "He's got a short leg and that guy that I shot at at Karen's had nothing the matter with his underpinning. He ran like a deer."

Tyson ignored this comment. "Was there a light in one of the windows?" he persisted. "Was there a door or window open that is closed now?"

"I've got it!" Steve said triumphantly. "You see those two loft doors above the main doors below? They were open, Johnny, and there was a block and tackle rigged up from the top beam!"

TYSON gripped Steve's arm. "You've hit it!" he cried. "That *must* be it, Steve. Stone was having something put in that loft —something that needed a block and tackle to lift it. And he didn't want any one to know about it. When he stumbled across your picture he saw the block and tackle painted in and he erased it. He didn't want a single clew to the fact that he had used it. I tell you, Steve, unless I'm a mile off, Mr. Lucien Stone is none other than Tate Randall, the murderer."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Steve. "Stone couldn't have rubbed out that picture. He was at old Adam's for lunch with me and Karen."

"Was he there when you got there," Tyson asked, "or did he turn up later?"

"As a matter of fact," Steve admitted, "he *did* come afterwards. About ten minutes afterwards."

"Plenty of time to deface the picture," Tyson pointed out.

Steve was still unconvinced. "But I've told you, Johnny, he's lame! The man I saw was sound of wind and limb, and I don't mean perhaps!"

"Don't be an ass," said Tyson shortly. "Wouldn't Randall disguise himself completely? What better disguise than an apparent game leg? Steve, we are going to have a look at Mr. Lucien Stone's hay loft."

"What do you expect to find?"

"Who knows?" said Tyson. "But let's go!"

They walked down across the field toward Stone's barn. As they approached they could see no sign of its owner. In all probability he was up at Barth's house; he had spent a great deal of time there since the investigation had started. Somehow it seemed incredible to Steve that Lucien Stone could be the man they sought. Barth had liked him; had him at his house. Surely if he had suspected him of being Tate Randall in disguise he wouldn't have had him around! Then logic forced him to admit that if Barth had only *suspected* Stone that is exactly what he would have done—had him around as much as possible to see if he could catch him out.

As they approached the barn Tyson drew a revolver from his hip pocket. "There's just a chance that we may run into our friend the panther," he said.

"If we do, I hope to God you know how to use that thing," said Steve, grimly. "I've seen that animal move, and it's very like chain lightning!"

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Stone used the main floor of the barn as a garage, but his car was not there now. The barn completely concealed the house which stood behind it, and they could not see whether or not the car was parked there. Tyson did not want to risk exposing himself to make sure.

"We'll just have a look around," he said.

There was nothing on the stable floor of the barn. At the back was a narrow flight of wooden stairs leading up to the loft. The two men exchanged glances, and then slowly and quietly Tyson led the way up. As Steve stepped into the dimly lighted loft he felt his heart suddenly begin to beat a little faster. Something about the place seemed to make the hair rise on the back of his neck.

"Smell it?" he said softly to Tyson. "*Cat!* There's been some kind of a jungle animal up here."

At the far end of the loft was a door which evidently led into what had once been a hired man's room. But before they reached this they saw something that made them pause. There was a heavy iron ring in one of the upright beams, and to this ring was attached a chain.

On the floor were several large bones from which the meat had been completely chewed, and there was also a large tin pan of water.

"The home of our friend the panther," said Tyson grimly. "I wonder where he is now?"

"Curiosity," said a cold voice, "often brings disastrous results."

They had neither of them heard that little door at the end of the loft open. As they swung around they saw Mr. Lucien Stone, his eyes burning with fury, and crouching at his feet, fangs bared, a huge black panther.

"God, Johnny, you were right!" said Steve.

Tyson nodded grimly. "Mr. Stone . . . or should I call you Tate Randall . . . ? I think the game is up."

Lucien laughed very softly. Then he uttered a sharp, guttural command. The black panther was suddenly a murderous streak in mid air! Johnny Tyson fired, emptying the six bullets in his gun straight at the charging beast. At the same instant both he and Steve sprang away. The panther fell to the floor, screaming and writhing in mortal agony. Tyson swung around just in time to see Mr. Lucien Stone coolly jump out the loft door—a drop of some fifteen feet to the ground. He pulled the trigger on his revolver, but there was a dull click. He had emptied it on the dying beast.

"After him!" he shouted, and tore down the narrow stairway with Steve in his wake.

CHAPTER VIII.

QUICK CHANGE ARTIST.

MR. LUCIEN STONE was not limping now. He was running like an antelope toward the roadster that was parked in front of his house. Johnny Tyson saw that there was little chance of catching him before he got under way, and he had no more bullets for his revolver. Steve's car was parked back down the main highway.

"Quick! We must get your car," Johnny yelled at Steve. And they headed pell mell across the field away from Mr. Stone.

Stone leaped into the roadster, the motor snapped to life, and the tires spun a cloud of gravel up behind as he jerked forward. For a moment it

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seemed that Lucien Stone's attempt at flight would end almost before it started, for as he tore around the driveway and out to the wooden gateway entrance, he was driving much too fast for safety. The car skidded as he jammed on the brakes to make the turn into the highway, and the front wheel crashed into one of the gate posts. But it was the post that gave, after crumpling the right front fender, and the car, swaying drunkenly for a moment, turned into the road and was off!

Steve and Tyson must have been almost a quarter of a mile behind when they got rolling themselves.

"We ought to telephone to Cullen," Steve said, gripping the wheel tightly.

"No time," snapped Tyson. "We've got to see where he's headed for first. He'll be at the State road in a minute and he may turn toward New York or head upstate. We've got to know."

Stone headed south and they kept on his trail. The next forty minutes were the most hair-raising Steve had ever been through. Stone drove like a madman, but somehow they managed to cling on his trail, never gaining much, but managing to keep him in full sight most of the time. He suddenly cut off the main road toward the toll bridge at Poughkeepsie.

"We've got him now," said Tyson grimly. "They'll stop him at the other end of the bridge."

But Mr. Lucien Stone was not to be stopped by any one. He drove straight past the frantically waving officers at the toll gate. Steve and Tyson were not so lucky, for by this time the police officers at the gate had drawn their guns and were blocking the way.

"Say, what the hell . . .?" one of them shouted.

"The man in that other car is wanted for murder!" Tyson rapped. "Climb on. We can't let him get away."

One of the policemen was evidently convinced, for he swung up onto the running board and they were off once more. But the delay had been too great. As they turned into the main street of Poughkeepsie the roadster was for the time being lost to view. Then suddenly Tyson let out a shout:

"Over there! Pulled up at the curb."

Across the street Steve saw a roadster exactly like Stone's, parked near a hotel. A man was getting leisurely out of it. Before Steve brought his machine to a full stop Tyson and the cop had jumped to the sidewalk and were making for the man. Steve came puffing up behind just in time to see Tyson staring at a complete stranger. The stranger looked inquiringly at Tyson and the policeman, both of whom were brandishing revolvers.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," said Tyson, a little breathless. "We're after a criminal who was escaping in a car exactly like yours. We lost him a little way back, and when we saw your car we thought you were he."

The man smiled faintly. "It's a quite usual make of car," he said. "But since you do not, obviously, want me . . ."

"Of course you're at perfect liberty to go, sir," said the policeman.

"Thank you." And the stranger walked into the hotel.

Tyson stood with his hat pushed back on his head. "I'd have sworn this was the same car," he said. He wandered slowly around toward the front of it. "Great God!" he shouted. "It *is* Stone's car. There's the fender he smashed on the gate as he left his house. And the motor's red-hot!"

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They dashed into the hotel, but the stranger was nowhere to be found.

INSPECTOR CROWELL of the New York Homicide Squad, listened to the story that Steve and Tyson had to tell.

"It's in character with everything we know about Tate Randall," he said. "The man is a genius at make-up and disguise. You can testify to that if he could so completely alter his appearance that you didn't know him . . . and alter it while he was driving a car at breakneck speed."

"It was amazing," Tyson admitted. "So amazing that I didn't bother to examine the car closely before we let him go."

"That's been the history of a fifteen year chase," said Crowell. "He's always given us the complete slip just when we thought we had him. The trouble is we know almost nothing about the man, his habits, his likes and dislikes. We've never had a clew as to where he might spend his time."

"I think I know something about him," said Steve. "He is passionately fond of the opera. He used to drive to New York three or four times a week just to hear that fifth rate company that's performing at the Madrid. He told me he never got enough of it when he was a kid, and now he goes every chance he gets."

"The Madrid, eh?" said Inspector Crowell thoughtfully. "There's a performance there to-night. Do you suppose he might show up for it?"

"Even if he did," said Tyson, "the odds against spotting him are tremendous. He will have assumed some new disguise and will walk by us quite simply."

Inspector Crowell nodded. "He can change his face and his figure all right, Mr. Tyson. But he can't change his finger prints." He looked at his watch. "Suppose every ticket stub turned in at the Madrid to-night were dropped in the box at the door . . . and down to the basement to a squad of finger print men? We instruct the doorman to make each ticket holder drop his own stub into the box. There's an outside chance that we'd get a clear enough print to identify."

"It would take a frightful amount of preparation and work," said Tyson. "And suppose he wore gloves?"

"Suppose he didn't?" said Crowell. "I tell you, Mr. Tyson, after fifteen years we're not overlooking a single bet."

IT was an elaborate machinery Inspector Crowell put into operation at the Madrid theater that night. A special box for ticket stubs was installed at the door—a box with a chute in it which led to the basement. And in the basement, equipped with everything necessary, were a dozen finger print experts. Steve, Tyson and the inspector waited anxiously for results as the stubs began to come down the chute to the men at the long table. They came much faster than the men could pass on them. Thus it was that the performance of "Boheme" was well under way before one of the men turned to Crowell.

"I think we've got it," he said. "It's not a complete print, but there is enough similarity to the part we have to take a chance."

"Where's he sitting?"

"Row C, Seat 114."

Crowell nodded grimly. "Are you ready, gentlemen? There's a cordon of police around the house in case he makes a break for it."

Crowell led the way upstairs and

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Steve, Tyson and two plainclothes men followed him. The house lights were dimmed, the finale of the first act was approaching, as they walked down the aisle to Row C. In seat 114 sat a man —a man Steve had never seen before.

There were four or five people between him and the aisle. Crowell called out sharply, "Randall, I want you!"

The man looked up quickly, the light of a hunted animal in his eyes. He saw Crowell, Steve and Tyson. He stood up, looked the other way, and saw the plainclothes men in the other aisle. Quick as the panthers he had trained the man sprang to the back of the seat in front of him, and, like some monstrous ape, began to run . . . over people's heads . . . leaping from row to row . . . to the orchestra pit and up onto the stage.

"Don't shoot!" Crowell snapped to one of his men who had drawn a gun. "You'll wing somebody else. He can't get out of the theater."

"Boheme" was completely disrupted as Tate Randall, alias Lucien Stone, alias The Black Panther, darted across the stage and into the wings with Crowell and the others in hot pursuit. The audience shouted hysterically; the orchestra stopped playing; singers fled for points of safety as they saw policemen brandishing guns. The place was pandemonium.

Back stage, carpenters and stage hands shouted instructions to Crowell.

"He went up the dressing room stairs!"

"He went toward the property room!"

Steve and Tyson, hot on Crowell's heels, chased up the iron stairway to the dressing rooms. A white-faced woman, plastered with grease paint, pointed to a door at the end of the hall. "He went into the property room."

"Better stand back," said Crowell grimly. "If he's cornered he may get tough."

The inspector walked calmly forward and flung open the property room door, his gun ready for action. But the room was empty . . . empty of The Black Panther at least. Hundreds of costumes, trunks, boxes, wigs, old swords, shields, a litter of odds and ends were there, but there was no sign of the escaped criminal. Methodically Crowell s e a r c h e d everywhere . . . everywhere but in one trunk on which a flower pot with a bright red geranium in it stood.

"You can't climb in a trunk and then put a flower pot on top of it," he reasoned to himself.

But Steve was staring at that flower pot, fascinated. He saw that it was not real . . . that it was a papier-mâché stage prop. And he saw, on a little table beside the trunk, a glue pot, the brush thrown carelessly beside it on the table cover. Steve took a quick step toward the trunk and tried to lift the flower pot. It came away, after a sharp tug, but it had been firmly glued to the top of the trunk. *The glue was still wet!*

"I think, Inspector, if you look in that trunk," said Steve quietly, "you'll find your man."

Crowell yanked up the lid, and very slowly Mr. Lucien Stone emerged, his hands held above his head.

CHAPTER IX.

STONE CONFESSES.

THERE was a look of burning hatred in the man's eyes as he looked at Steve. He paid no attention to Crowell, who snapped a pair of handcuffs over his wrists.

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"Damn you, Blake!" he said savagely. "You've stuck your nose into this from start to finish! You, with your picture . . . and your memory of what was in it after I'd destroyed it! You, with your memory for the fact that I had a passion for the opera! You, who noticed that flower pot was glued to the top of the trunk! I wish to God I hadn't trusted to luck that day in the woods! I wish to God I'd finished you with my own hands!"

"I wish," said Steve grimly, "you'd tried. I regret, Mr. Stone, or Randall, or whatever your name is, that the law won't permit me to settle accounts with you personally. I haven't forgotten that you killed my friend, Adam Barth! I haven't forgotten that you tried to kill my fiancée!"

A cunning smile flickered across Stone's lips. "Ah, but I didn't kill Barth, my friend," he said sardonically. "It was the panther! I trained it myself . . . brought it to Stockford, drugged, in a sack. I called Barth out into the night, and he came . . . the suspicious old fool! He walked out like an innocent child, and in a second that panther was at his throat! Lord, it was quick, amazingly quick!"

Tyson regarded the murderer with a shudder. "Barth had guessed that you were Tate Randall?" he asked.

"He wasn't sure," said Stone, licking his thin lips. "It was the Jackson woman who first suspected it. She went to Barth, and they decided to watch me. Oh, I knew it! They were so transparent. They'd ask me sudden questions—try to trap me. And all the time it was I who was plotting to trap them, the fools!"

"Did you know that Barth and Mrs. Jackson were in Stockford when you came there to live?"

"Certainly not, but when I met Barth I saw that he didn't know me from Adam! Ha! No pun meant. I was safe with him . . . I was so completely changed. And then Irene turned up, and right away she suspected, went to Barth. Women are like that—they see through everything. They started laying traps for me, and I knew I had to get them."

"How did you get the panther?" Crowell asked.

"I stole it," Stone chuckled. "Stole it from a circus. A friend of mine in town kept it—never mind who! Every time I came to town to the opera I worked with him till he was ready. Then I drugged him and carried him to Stockford in a sack. There was no other way to get him there without attracting attention, and I didn't want any one to know about him."

"You meant to use him to kill Barth and Mrs. Jackson, and then get him out of town?" Tyson asked.

"Exactly—after turning the other animals loose to cover up. When I got him to my house I had to hide him somewhere. He was too heavy to lift, and I rigged up a block and tackle to get him into the loft. It was late . . . five in the morning. I was tired, and I didn't bother to take down the tackle that night. And then, the next morning, there was Blake, painting in the field, and I couldn't do anything till he left."

"After you'd taken it down you happened by his canvas, saw the block and tackle painted in, and wiped it out?" asked Tyson.

"What else could I do? I didn't dare have that record left in paint! Suppose the panther were discovered . . . as it was? Blake would see that tackle in his picture . . . put two and two together . . . and where would I be? Then, when I learned that Barth

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lived long enough to mention the Black Panther, I got scared. I knew they'd find out he'd had none in his collection. I knew they'd guess some one had imported one for the express purpose of killing Barth and Mrs. Jackson. I decided to get rid of Blake and Miss Marsh before they talked about the picture." His teeth gritted together. "I failed in that, and here I am!"

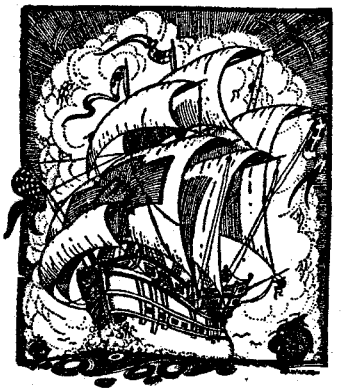
"How did you let the animals out without danger to yourself?" Steve asked.

Stone grinned, a cruel twisted grin. "I had intended to get Barth's keys from the house. But while the panther was working on Barth, Griswold, the keeper, attracted by the noise, came along. I turned the beast on him. You saw him, Blake? My God, what a job that panther did on him! I took his keys. I took off all the padlocks, but I didn't open the doors. I knew presently one of the animals would discover that his door was open and in a minute they'd all be out."

"Weren't you afraid they'd attack you?" Steve asked.

"Even a lion," said Stone grimly, "hesitates to attack a black panther! I had him on a chain . . . and they cowered back in their cages. You should have seen. Lord, Tyson, I'm sorry you shot him." A note of macabre tenderness crept into his voice. "He was a lovely animal!"

THE END



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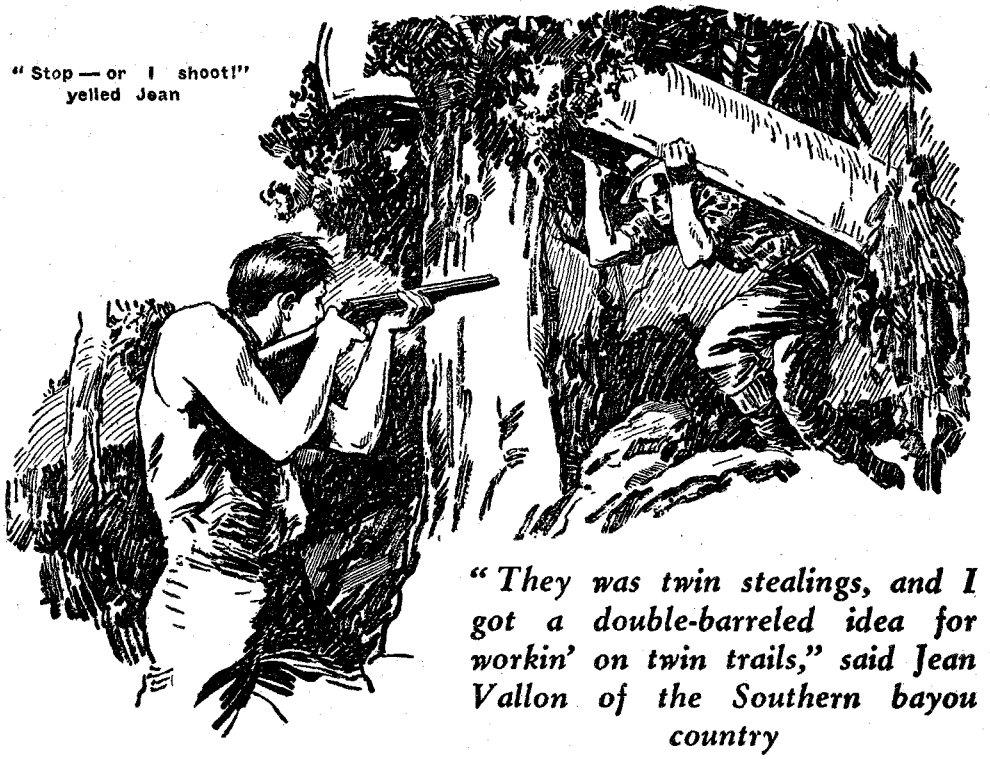

"They was twin stealings, and I got a double-barreled idea for workin' on twin trails," said Jean Vallon of the Southern bayou country

Twin Trails

By FRANK DEL CLARKE

LONG red rays of a setting sun followed the slim craft of Jean Vallon as it slipped rapidly down-bayou. The early evening was still and quiet. Jean sent his *pirogue* forward with slow, skillful strokes, and with such ease that the boat and the man seemed to be a part of each other. No premonition of trouble crossed his mind until the dusky silence was broken suddenly by the sound of high-pitched, angry voices which came to him across the water. Clearly, they came from his father's boat shed which squatted on the bayou bank, thirty lengths or so ahead.

Jean quickened his stroke until he felt his slight craft almost shoot out from under him. Obeying a final deft twist of the paddle, the *pirogue* slid half its length up onto the muddy slope below the boat shed which was their landing place. Jean leapt out and ran toward the wide, open end of the shed. Loud voices still issued from inside, and one of them was certainly his father's.

Jean brought up short just inside, and at his sudden appearance the voices stopped abruptly. Papa Vallon was a leather-skinned little man with a gray moustache so flowing that it could be seen from behind. Just now he was poking an angry, wagging fin-

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ger up almost into the face of a man twice his size.

The big man, glaring down out of eyes which were as black as French-drip coffee, turned on Jean. Instead of speaking, he spat contemptuously and leered.

Jean moved quickly to his father's side. The two were almost of a size, though the son was a trifle broader and heavier.

The proud Norman blood of the Acadians coursed in the Vallon veins, but Jean was young and modern and American.

"What's it all about, Papa?" he asked.

Papa Vallon's hand dropped to his side. His little shoulders gave an expressive shrug of disgust.

"This one here would buy our newly finished *pirogue* for the amount of five dollaire—an' what you t'ink of that, *mon* Jean?"

Jean looked up at the man and laughed insolently. "My father's been making boats for thirty years, an' still we make the best *pirogues* from Morgan City to New Iberia. You think we do it for nothing? Not by a damn sight! If you want the best, you pay the price."

"*Fous!*" growled the big man. "How much cost the wood?—*Poof!*—How long you take to make one like that, eh? I could make it in a day!"

"Why don't you try it?" suggested Jean sarcastically.

Papa Vallon exploded again, "How long we take, eh?" his voice rose shrilly. "Ver' well, I tell you. We begin when we specially selec' the cypress; then, five year we season heem in our own shed; then we fit heem together; an' then we finish when we get finish, yes.—Five dollaire, eh?"

He snapped his fingers in the big man's face with the audacity of a bantam rooster.

IF the big man had chosen at that point to go his way, the matter might have been ended; but instead, his black eyes ran greedily, covetously, over the trim lines of the new *pirogue* once more. It had been built for the bayou, the swamp, the marshland. Its lines were not so elaborate as those of a canoe, but none the less pleasing; its joints were perfectly fitted and fastened; it was large enough for two good bayou men, but at the same time so light that a man might easily throw it up to his shoulder with one arm. With his great paws, the man could not have fashioned such a thing in a month of days.

His powerful, hairy hands reached out and shook old man Vallon angrily. "You ol' fool! You be sorry you do not take my five dollaire—yes!"

"Turn him loose!" cried Jean, and he leapt at the big man, tearing the fellow's hands free from his father's shoulders.

The man cursed. He clamped his huge hands on Jean, lifting him as if he were no more than a child, and flung him headlong out onto the ground. Then he went out himself, swaggering down toward his own boat at the edge of the bayou. But he paused where Jean was trying to raise himself to his feet again.

"That's what you get to monkey wit' me!" he sneered. "An' this you get extra for *laniape*."

He swung his arm, and again knocked Jean head over heels again into a scrubby clump of palmetto. Before Jean knew what had struck him the nasty-tempered stranger was well on his way in his own battered boat.

Jean climbed slowly to his feet, with

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one hand nursing a painful bruise on his cheek which he knew he would never have received had he been more than half the size and power of the big man. Papa Vallon was standing beside him, shaking his fist after the disappearing Cajun and cursing under his breath in choice Creole French.

Before locking up the shed for the night, Jean thoughtfully watched his father run loving, capable hands over the newly finished *pirogue*. Still angry, the old man was mumbling to himself, "Five dollaire!—five dollaire for this beauty here . . ."

Jean didn't want to say anything to worry his father further, but he was thinking that they would see more of that stranger before they were through with him.

Had he been able to read the thoughts of the man who now sat drinking wine at Dago Joe's place in St. Marie, a quarter of a mile away, his misgivings would have been greater still. The big man was one who would seek his own ends, if not by one means, then by another, and his respect for the half-sized boat makers, father and son, was less than nothing at all.

AFTER a supper of fresh red snapper that Jean had caught that afternoon, the Vallons went early to bed. But Jean could not go to sleep at once. To-night the very quiet of their little place, removed somewhat as it was from the town of St. Marie itself, seemed to whisper warnings to him. Whenever he turned on his right side, which was his natural way of sleeping, the bruise on his face rubbed his pillow and turned his thoughts back to the threatening stranger.

Just as he was dozing off, he thought he heard a noise that wasn't a natural whisper of the night. He drew himself up in bed to listen, and a pale,, wandering ray from the moon outside played upon the polished gunmetal of his double-barreled shot gun, resting across pegs in the wall. He heard further noise. This time he was sure it came from some place in or near the boat shed.

Jean leapt from bed and snatched his gun from the wall. He jumped into his pants without bothering with shoes or other clothing. He must have made some noise, for Papa Vallon also roused up, and was close behind him when Jean flung open the rear door which led in the direction of the boat shed below.

"Stay back, Papa! I will take care of this business," ordered Jean, as he rushed out through the door.

He did not pause to look back, and so he failed to see the grotesque little figure, clad only in a white nightgrown and that flowing moustache which could have been seen from behind. Papa Vallon might have been a miniature ghost, as he scurried out into the pale blue light of the moon, in the wake of his only beloved son. Papa Vallon, like many another little man, was no coward. He had no intention of staying behind, if something was on foot which required the use of a shot gun.

By the time Jean came even with the lower end of the shed, he could see that the doors had been pried open; and half way between himself and the bayou he could easily see the silhouette of a large man, running awkwardly toward the water, with a *pirogue* over his great shoulders.

"Stop!" yelled Jean. "Stop—or I shoot!" And there was a deadly convincing quality in the tone of his voice as he yelled.

The distance between them seemed the greater because of the moon's thin

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light and the crazy shadows cast by giant oaks and their eerily drooping Spanish moss; but Jean had gained quickly on the burdened man, who was now perhaps no more than ten paces away. An eight-gauge, double-barreled Parker is not to be toyed with at such a range as that.

Jean stopped and threw up his gun. But almost as if sensing the move, the thief also stopped suddenly, dropping the boat on one end and holding it up before him for protection. For a brief moment everything was so still that Jean could hear the other's heavy breathing, and at that moment the big thief may have had the feeling that he was holding his own coffin up before him.

Jean took a step closer before he said, "Drop that *pirogue*, you! I won't shoot if you drop the boat and do not run."

There was no answer other than a quick flash of metal in the moonlight, and something went swishing past Jean's ear so close that he could feel the wind of it on his bruised cheek. From just behind him came an agonized scream, and the thud of a small body.

A grim terror gripped Jean's heart as he wheeled. He saw the form of his father, stretched out on the ground where he'd stood no more than a few feet to the rear, and there was an unearthly twitching about that little nightshirted figure as it lay there. It was horribly like the muscular movement that some living things make even after death.

Jean flung himself to his knees beside the old man. He utterly forgot his gun, forgot the *pirogue* and the thief, forgot everything except that his Papa Vallon lay there with a knife buried in his side, desperately close to where the heart of a man should be.

It must have been a minute or more before his hand steadied and his head cleared. When he looked up, the man and the *pirogue* were gone.

PAPA VALLON'S wound was a very serious one, but he wasn't dead. Old Doc Landry, who'd brought Jean into the world, did what he could; but the slow, doubtful shaking of the old medico's head gave Jean little comfort. The elder Vallon must have rest and quiet.

The Doc sent over a competent woman as nurse; and even Jean was forbidden more than a few minutes each day in the bedroom. He was wretched and restless as time slipped by. He grew obsessed with but one idea, and that was to trail the man who had stolen the *pirogue* and put a knife into his father's side.

His feelings grew worse and worse, for the very reason that he didn't know where to begin. The only clue was a discarded battered *pirogue* which he'd found not far from his own landing place. He thought the thief had left it, unable to tow it away in flight. It was old and not different from hundreds of others of its kind. It could hardly have been identified with certainty. However, it was on his land, so he pulled it up near the boat shed and left it there.

Sheriff Pardue was mightily excited at first, but he cooled off as soon as he realized that he knew of nothing he could do about the case. The knife in Papa Vallon's side was an ordinary one, such as thousands of bayou people might have. Possible finger prints had been ruined by other hands, before any one realized that they might be important.

Jean's brooding was broken only by one curious incident. He was in the boat shed one day, repairing the broken

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doors, when a stocky, heavy-shouldered man strode up from the bayou. His wide shadow darkened the door where Jean worked. When Jean looked up he saw a stranger in plaid jumper, dirty corduroys, and swamp moccasins. Right away Jean decided he was a little drunk.

"Want t' git me a *pirogue,*" the stranger said. "How much?"

"Ain't got any? Why you tell me dat?"

"Last one we finished was stole," said Jean. "I c'n make you one, though."

"You lyin'!" said the stranger angrily. "What's that one by the bayou?" He waved a hand down toward the landing place.

"Mine," said Jean.

"How much? I take dat one, *yes.*"

"You take that one, *no.* It's mine.—Not for sale."

AT that moment the stranger's eye caught sight of the old, deserted *pirogue* that Jean had drawn up on the bank. He walked over and examined it, muttering under his breath and nodding his great head strangely. Then he came back, grasped Jean roughly by the shoulders, and shook him.

"I take that good one of your'n, yes. You make one for yourself. I got to have a new one like that Jacques Breaux."

"Jacques Breaux?" said Jean quickly.

"But yes. Dat *cochon!* I show heem, I will!" He gripped Jean again until Jean could feel his fingers gouge into his flesh. He could smell liquor on the man's breath. "I got to have it, yes, or maybe I shake your little head off!" he threatened.

With a quick, agile motion, Jean jerked free and staggered back against a work bench. When he straightened up there was a huge draw knife in his hand, to judge by the brightness of its blade, as sharp as a razor.

"Maybe I slice your big head off!" he cried, advancing a step.

The big man backed away cursing. "I make you sorry for dis!" he warned. "You can't do lak dat to Mushrat Pete. I keel bigger ones dan you, for less than dat!"

"Get th' hell outa here," said Jean, flourishing his draw knife as if he meant business.

He was too angry now to know what he was doing, and the other must have sensed it, for he departed. But down at the bayou's edge, before he went off in his own pirogue he stood a long time gazing at Jean's fine one.

When Jean thought it over afterward, the thing puzzled him. Particularly because it was so much like the episode which had preceded the other theft and knifing. Why should two swamp men in close succession get so ugly over the purchase of a *pirogue?*

Jean said nothing of the matter, but that night he slept in the boat shed, with his shot gun by his side, so fearful was he that the repetition might be carried further. But nothing at all happened, and in the sunlight of the following day he was forced to think that it was just a coincidence.

So things stood until the day when Tante Pruit made her monthly trip into St. Marie for supplies.

TANTE PRUIT was one of the strangest creatures known to the people of that section. She was older than any one knew, and she looked even older than that. Her skin was dried and shriveled. She lived alone, on a ramshackle shanty barge on

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the edge of the salt marshes, apparently eking the barest living by making wine and what she was pleased to call *cognac*, and selling it to whatever marsh stragglers might pass her way. She knew all the people of the marsh. A strange old hag, people said, but she was not a bad sort, if you let her alone.

Jean had repaired the old woman's skiff a number of times, without charge, always wondering why it hung together at all. Sometimes she stopped at his landing to borrow some nails or a bit of oakum. On this particular trip she saw him standing on the bank gazing at the *pirogue* he'd found deserted.

"How's yuh pappy?" she asked.

"Bad," said Jean, scarcely looking up.

Her eyes followed his to the old *pirogue*. "How comes you wit' that?" questioned her toothless mouth.

His quick young eyes met her old ones, which were little and bright and as piercing as those of a witch. Jean often had the feeling that she could see in the dark.

"Wish I knew!" he said.

"Jacques Breaux," she muttered. "He got him a new one, an' dat make fight wit' Pete."

"You mean the man called Mushrat Pete?" asked Jean quickly.

She nodded, like a scarecrow bent by a wisp of wind. "Mean 'uns, they is.—Gittin' fur home now." And without further word or gesture she oared her skiff away with slow but capable motions.

"Wait, Tante, wait!" called Jean. "That one stole our *pirogue*—that one put a knife into Papa Vallon. You gotta help me find him. Help me, Tante; I'll give you a new skiff."

The old crone merely shook her head in her strange way, mumbling as she went off so that Jean could barely hear, "Don't come my way, young 'un. Mean 'uns, they is—jus' lak t' kill you an' kill me too!"

Jean stood still on the bank, and like a man under a spell he watched her almost out of sight before he moved. Maybe she was half crazy, yet she might know the trail of the stolen *pirogue*.

Jean went straight to the house of Sheriff Pardue, in St. Marie. But the sheriff wasn't there. Then Jean went back home, got his shot gun, and started out alone. And when Jean reached his landing place, his own good *pirogue* was gone, and another old deserted one was there in its place. Somebody had stolen his—and in broad daylight, too.

Two strange customers and two strange thefts in the space of three days! That was too much for Jean, and he stood there for a time, wondering what it all could mean. Tante Pruit knew more than she had said. She was afraid of the "mean 'uns." There was a man named Breaux who had a new *pirogue;* somehow he had a fight with another called Mushrat Pete, who'd also wanted badly to get a new *pirogue*. Two new boats were now missing, and there was some strange connection between the two.

DOC LANDRY was up at the house. Papa Vallon was no worse, nor was he any better. In quick jerky sentences, Jean told him all that had happened.

"What you goin' to do?" asked the Doc.

"I'm goin' t' Tante Pruit's an' find out where they are."

"You ain't goin' alone?"

"Sheriff Pardue ain't home," said Jeane.

"Wait," counseled Landry.

"No," said Jean grimly. "I'm goin'

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after 'em." And he left the house with his double-barreled shot gun under his arm.

But Landry ran after him and tried to stop him. "Those men from th' marsh are both twice your size," he argued. Already you been slapped around by both of 'em. What chance you got against th' pair of 'em?"

"They was twin stealings," said Jean, "an' I got a twin-barreled gun. Besides I got a double-barreled idea for workin' on twin trails."

He climbed into the old *pirogue* that remained on his landing place and set out for the shanty boat of toothless Tante Pruit.

But Doc Landry shook his head doubtfully and went to hunt for the sheriff.

THE shanty boat of Tante Pruit was as strange a sight as even a swamp man might hope to see. It was a flat scow or barge, perhaps fourteen by twenty, which with the years had become almost entirely water-logged. It now rested half in the water and half on a mud flat just below the surface, so that it listed heedlessly toward the little bayou which lazed crookedly past like the watery trail of a drunken boatman. On one half of the scow was a rickety little cabin with a rusty section of stovepipe protruding at a tipsy angle and emitting a wisp of smoke. That was the home of Tante Pruit, who was older than anybody knew, including herself.

As Jean swung around the last bend he saw her skiff made fast at the down-stream end of the scow; and although no one was in sight, he didn't doubt that her piercing old eyes were scanning his approach from some place behind the dark windows of the little shack.

He drove the nose of his boat into the marsh grass by the side of the scow, and stepped to the flat deck, gun in hand. He walked slowly into the shack through the open door. The old hag was bent over an iron stove in one corner and did not turn at once, though he knew that she was aware of his presence. In another corner sprawled a mattress tick, stuffed lumpily with Spanish moss. There were also a few wooden chairs, trussed up with bits of wire to keep them from falling apart, a crude wood table, and a cupboard; and ranged on the floor, near the walls, were jugs and bottles and kegs. That was all—a cozy little home on the edge of the great marshes.

Tante Pruit looked around at last. "I'se 'fraid you come," she said.

"My own *pirogue* was stole to-day," he told her.

Her keen old eyes rested fixedly upon the eight-gauge Parker under Jean's arm; and as he spoke, he thought a hint of fear crept into her wizened face—not fear of him, but fear of what was to happen.

"I think it was stole by Mushrat Pete. You know who took the other one, Tante, an' you're goin' to tell me now. You know 'em both, an' I b'lieve you know what it's all about.— You got t' tell me."

She shook her head miserably from side to side. "They kill me—they kill you—an' the marsh swallow up. It happen before, it happen again. You one good little man, Mister Jean. They two big 'uns—an' they's bad 'uns, they is!"

Jean dropped the stock of his gun to the floor and let the barrel lean against the door jamb. He took a few steps forward and grasped the old woman by the shoulders.

"Stop that, Tante! Tell me who they are— Where are they, an' why'd

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they both have to steal our *pirogues?* That's what I want to know—an' you got t' tell me."

Tante Pruit presently began to mumble through toothless lips.

"Jacques Breaux, he downriver, aroun' two bends on this side. He see you fishing in yoh boat one day, an' he ask me where you get a *pirogue* lak that. I tell him Papa Vallon, by St. Marie. Then one day he come here wit' fine new boat, an' he make fun at this Mushrat Pete, who live down bayou, aroun' one bend on t'other side. For years they hate each other. Each one, he steal t'other's shwimp traps. For one dead little shwimp they kill each other.

"So when Pete see that fine new boat by Breaux, he say he git himself one lak that—maybe better. Breaux he say no. He say th' ol' one good 'nough for Pete, th' new one for Breaux himself, only. That make Pete more mad yet, an' he swear he git him a new one or he break that one of Breaux's to pieces. They git drunk here, an' they fight on th' floor." Her cracked voice died away, and a shudder ran over her skinny body. "*Sacré Coeur!* They kill me for tellin' that—an' they kill you, too."

"You know this Jacques Breaux, he put a knife in Papa Vallon." said Jean. "You know that, Tante? That's why I come this way."

NEITHER of the two knew that a *pirogue* built by the hand of Papa Vallon was even then sliding alongside the scow. A broad, husky man got out and drew the boat silently up on the scow deck, as if it were no more than a feather. He could hear the voices inside the shack. Jean was saying:

"I come out here t' get th' man that stole my *pirogue,* an' I know how I'm gonna get him. Maybe each of 'em could beat me—but the both of 'em can't."

Just then it was that the black-button eyes of the old woman caught sight of the shadow in the doorway. Her thin, receding lips worked against each other, but no sound came. She was paralyzed on the spot where she stood.

A coarse, snarling laugh escaped the man in the doorway. "You come t' git 'em, yes?" he mocked.

Jean wheeled and jumped sidewise with the quickness of a cat. But Mushrat Pete stood between him and his gun. Pete's heavy brows drew together, and his head protruded out forward from his powerful body.

"Yes," said Jean, quietly.

A low moan came from the old woman. "Oh, Lawd Gawd! Oh, mis'ry! I tol' you, I tol' you!"

Pete gave her a contemptuous look, as though she did not exist. "*Taisez vous!*" he growled. "Gimme a drink."

And while she hurried to obey, he grinned evilly at Jean.

"You take th' draw knife to me, eh, by St. Marie! *Bien!* I am not a man of the town. I am a man of th' marsh—an' now maybe you be sorry."

He took a dirty glass of evil-smelling liquor from the trembling fingers of Tante Pruit and gulped it.

Jean said, "Listen, Pete. Has Breaux seen that new boat of yours yet?"

"*Non,*" said Pete. "But he will see it when he come here to-night, when the sun go down; an' then he will see if he can have a better boat than Mushrat Pete."

"He says he'll smash it, if you get a boat like his," said Jean.

"I lak t' see that Breaux try it," boasted Pete. "He smash my boat, I

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smash heem, yes!— But first I smash you, eh—an' maybe you keep away from th' marsh."

"Wait," argued Jean. "You think I care about th' boats? No. You think I come out here t' fight with a man the size of you, for a *pirogue?* No— Breaux, he knifed my father.— You can have th' *pirogue,* you understan'? But let me have my gun, an' let me get this Jacques Breaux."

A CRAFTY look crept into Pete's deep-sunk eyes. For the first time he saw the shot gun and took it into his great hands.

"It's your gun, eh?— You think maybe you fool me an' get th' gun."

He laughed, and suddenly he stepped forward and dealt a vicious slap to the side of Jean's head which staggered the smaller man back on his heels. Jean brought up against the side wall, from which he got a purchase to spring forward.

Pete still held the gun barrel in his left hand, and the stock still rested upon the floor. When Jean drove forward, maddened and desperate and foolhardy now, he clutched for the gun barrel, thinking to prevent its use. And if Pete had to fight for the gun, for the moment at least it would keep his huge paws off Jean.

The stock slipped on the floor and jammed in between Pete's legs. With the force of Jean's charge, the gun acted as a lever to pry Pete's legs suddenly out from under him. Both of them went to the floor with a crash.

Somehow in the scramble one barrel of the gun went off with a roar that seemed to tear the entire shack to pieces. The charge of buckshot at such close range went through a rotten section of cypress plank in the side wall, near the roof, and acrid smoke eddied about the low-ceilinged little room. For a second, Pete seemed stunned; and that second was all Jean needed to be gone.

He was out of the door and in the old *pirogue* which had belonged to Pete, and skimming along downstream like a hell diver running and flying on the surface of the brown velvet water.

Pete's head must have struck the floor when he fell. He seemed dazed when he sat up and looked about him with the confused expression of a man who does not know exactly what has struck him. Tante Pruit cringed in her corner by the stove, little moaning noises coming from her thin lips.

"Gi..me a drink!" grunted Pete. And before he got to his feet he had several more.

Then he looked outside, to see if his new *pirogue* was there. When he turned back, he laughed.

"That's th' end of that shwimp," he said. "Didn't even have th' guts t' take th' *pirogue,* when he had th' chance."

He didn't know how deliberate had been Jean's choice of boats.

The sun was dropping low in the west, its long rays painting a bloody path across the muddy little bayou.

"Breaux'll be after his drink, come sundown," mumbled Tante Pruit. "Pete, you better go, less'n you lookin' foh trouble."

Pete turned on her and glared. An idea had suddenly clicked into his brain. "I got a gun," he said slowly, "an' it ain't my gun. It's that Vallon's gun, an' he come out here t' git Breaux fur knifin' his paw. Breaux might like as not git shot, with that there gun, an' if you ever opens your toothless face, you ol' bag o' bones—" He poured himself another glass of liquor and grinned. "*Eh, bien!* Let that Breaux come, an'

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maybe I have me two new *pirogues,* yes."

AS soon as Jean got around the first bend, he hugged the shore line, with its screen of whispering marsh grass. Then came the second bend, and he could see the upper part of a shack, set back from the water a few dozen paces and almost hidden by the grass. If he hugged that side close enough, he would not be seen from the shack. He went slowly, now, and without making the slightest sound. Abruptly, he came to an opening in the otherwise unbroken line of the bank. The grass had been cleared for a few feet, leaving a muddy flat on which to draw up a boat. From it a faint path led back toward the shack. And there on the mud flat lay the Vallon *pirogue* that Jacques Breaux had stolen.

The red sun was almost in the grass tops now, and it would not be long before Breaux would be going to Tante Pruit's for his drink. Within less than a minute, Jean was gliding away again in the new boat, and the old one of Mushrat Pete's lay precisely in its place, on Breaux's landing flat.

Jean shot straight across the stream and into the heavy grass on the other side. He jumped out and drew the *pirogue* after him into complete concealment from which he could peer out and watch developments across the way.

It was but a matter of minutes before Breaux strode down the path. The big man stopped short when he came to his mud flat at the bayou's edge. As if he could not believe his eyes, he stared down at the old boat that lay there. Then he began to curse loud enough so that even Jean, across the water, could hear him. In between the profanity were enough words to make it clear that Breaux thought Mushrat Pete had had the nerve to steal his new *pirogue* and leave the old one in its place. He was wild with rage.

Before he launched the craft, he reached under his belt and drew out a hunting knife, as if to make sure it was there. Then he replaced it carefully, and set off in Pete's *pirogue,* paddling as hard as he could toward the shanty scow of Tante Pruit.

As soon as Breaux had rounded the first bend, Jean followed cautiously. At the second bend, Jean paused, peered through the screen of grass, and then drew his craft out of sight again. He crept forward across the soggy land until he was nearly opposite the scow. There he took up his position to watch.

Breaux slid alongside the scow and stared at the new *pirogue,* which had been drawn up on the deck. No one but Jean could have told the difference between it and the one that Breaux had stolen. From within the shack came the straggling notes of a deep-throated song in Cajun French. No other boat was in sight except Tante's skiff, so it was clear enough that Pete was inside drinking merrily, brazenly celebrating his daring theft of his enemy's *bateau.* Breaux could interpret the thing in no other way, and if he was mad at first, he was still madder now.

He leapt to the deck of the scow and bellowed, "Come out, you swamp rat! You t'ink you steal th' new boat of Jacques Breaux, eh?— Come out!"

THE singing ceased abruptly. A dead silence hovered over the scene for a long moment, while the sun slipped down into the endless expanse of marsh grass to the west.

The end of Jean's eight-gauge, double-barreled Parker protruded cautiously from behind the door jamb.

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Breaux's hand made a move toward his knife.

"Don't try nothin' funny, Breaux," came Pete's loud voice from within the shack. "I got you covered. And don't move from there."

Pete appeared in the doorway. Breaux stood still, his knife held behind him. From where Jean lay, he could see it all clearly, and he could see the haggard face of Tante Pruit, pressed against the pane of a dirty window.

"What you mean, I steal your *pirogue,* Breaux? 'At's my *pirogue.* I bought it from Vallon—an' it's better'n your'n. So what you gonna do about that, Breaux? I tol' yuh.—An' what's this, Breaux, I been hearin' about you knifin' ol' Papa Vallon? His kid come out here t' git you fer it, Breaux. I got th' kid's gun here, right now. Maybe it'd look all right if you was t' git shot wit' th' kid's gun, eh? So don't start tellin' me I stole no *pirogue* off'n you, Breaux." The shot gun was trained on Breaux's middle, and the distance was not more than ten or twelve feet, but the end of it wavered a little.

"You lyin' mushrat, you!" swore Breaux. "How come it is that my new boat's gone an' your old one was there in its place? How come that, Pete? You stole it, you did; an' there it lays, right there between us."

"You're crazy drunk, Breaux," argued the drunken one. "I left my ol' *pirogue* down t' Vallon's place when I got my new one. Hate t' shoot you whilst you're drunk!"

The significance of the fact that Pete did have Jean's gun, and that he was on the verge of murdering Breaux with it, began to trouble Jean's mind. That was an angle of the thing he hadn't figured on at all. Pete could shoot Breaux, silence Tante Pruit, and escape, leaving the finger of guilt on Jean. Jean had deliberately engineered this fight between the two big men, knowing that he was incapable of coping with either of them himself; but now that he'd got it started, he wanted to stop it before murder was done. He'd better never have brought the gun, for all the good it was to him now. As he tried to think what to do, he thought he heard a faint *tap-tap-tapping* sound, somewhere in the distance.

He decided to try to distract their attention to himself. He made a noise in the grass and tossed a clump of mud into the water. The sound it made distracted Pete's attention for a second, and the gun wavered in his direction. Just as it did so, Breaux took advantage of the opening to fling his knife and rush in on Pete. Pete lurched and fired, missing by a wide margin; but the same lurch that ruined his aim saved him also from Breaux's knife, which sank into the cypress boards by his shoulder.

The kick of the gun threw Pete completely off his drunken balance, and Breaux was upon him now, wresting the gun away from him. Ordinarily, they would have made a match, but in Pete's drunken condition he hadn't the strength left to hold his own.

Breaux seized the gun and dealt Pete a vicious slap across the head with the heavy barrel. Pete slumped down to the deck and lay still.

A LOW, dismal wail came from inside the shack, but Breaux seemed not to hear it. He looked this way and that, and stared for a moment down at the limp and bloody thing at his feet. A great gash in Pete's head spread red in a widening pool on the weathered deck. Then Breaux looked across the water toward

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the place from which Jean's interruption had come. He could see nothing.

In the silence now came the sound again, much more clearly—*phut-phut-phut!* It was recognizable now—a one cylinder motorboat, and it could not be far off upstream.

The sound seemed to give sudden decision to Breaux's mind. Forgetting his knife, he slid the gun into the new *pirogue* on the scow deck, launched the little craft, and made off downstream as fast as he knew how to paddle. Some one was coming, but if once he could get out of sight around the next bend, he could disappear like a ghost in the maze of waterways that made a tangled net work of the marsh.

Jean crashed through the grass now, making no attempt at quiet until he reached his hidden boat. Only a few lengths behind Breaux he shot out into the bayou.

"You ain't gettin' away, Breaux," yelled Jean, as loud as he could.

He wanted to make a noise. He wanted to be heard and followed, and he knew that he could keep Breaux in sight, if only the motorboat would follow.

Breaux was desperate now. Young Vallon was a wizard in a *pirogue,* and there was no chance of outstripping him. Breaux must have sensed that his fate was bearing down upon him, closing up on his trail, which had always been an evil one. It was the swift *pirogue* of Jean Vallon that clung to him and dragged him back from freedom like the hand of justice reaching across the water.

He dropped his paddle and reached for the gun. He twisted around, raised the gun and took careful aim. At that close range he couldn't miss, and if he could only shake off that shrimp of a man who could handle a *pirogue* like no man he'd ever seen, he might yet lose himself in the marsh and elude pursuit.

Not knowing which barrel Pete had fired at him, Breaux pulled both triggers at once. Both of them clicked on shells that had spent their charge.

He let the useless gun clatter to the bottom of his boat, as he snatched madly for his paddle again. But Jean was nearly abreast of him now, heading him off, herding him almost as if he were a cow. Breaux struck out at Jean with his long paddle, but with one swift stroke Jean had slipped back out of reach; and before Breaux could make another play, Jean had swung across his bow, heading it off with his paddle until he nearly upset the big man into the bayou.

Breaux regained his balance with difficulty and tried to lash out again in self defense. It was the strangest battle for life and death that had ever been known in the marshlands. No bodily violence on either side, and yet the ever-present deadly hazard of being upset. For whichever one might turn turtle would be utterly at the mercy of the other, not to mention the treacherous water itself, where snakes and turtles, sting-rays and garfish played hidden beneath the surface at their dirty games.

MEANWHILE, progress downstream into the security of the trail-less marshes had stopped. They were only drifting a little with the slow current, and as they fought the sound of the *phut-phut-phut!* was coming closer and closer.

Breaux's great strength was of no use to him now, for this despised shrimp of a man could maneuver a *pirogue* with maddening deftness. He darted in and out, thrusting and parry-

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ing, always a split second ahead of Breaux's desperate lunges. Jean's lightness was even an advantage now, and the little craft that he and his father had designed and built with such patient care was serving him well. He harried the big man in and out, back and forth, like a terrier driving a bull crazy.

It was that strange duel that the men in the little white launch saw when at last they came around the bend. Over his shoulder Breaux caught sight of it, and when he recognized Sheriff Pardue in the bow, a gun across his knees, stark, frenzied fear came into his eyes. At the same moment, he lost control of his balance, and with a piercing yell went headlong over into the muddy water. He choked and spluttered and thrashed wildly with his arms, for Breaux, like many another bayou man, was no swimmer. He caught hold of the upturned boat and clung to it. There was nothing but panic in his heart when the white launch slid alongside with the motor off.

Old Doc Landry sat astern near the engine.

"Get me outa here!" Breaux screamed. "Save me!"

Jean's *pirogue* was on one side of him and the launch on the other, but at first no hand reached out to help the floundering man.

"That's the one that stole our *pirogue* and threw the knife into Papa Vallon," said Jean to Sheriff Pardue. "An' just now he tried to kill Mushrat Pete, and then me. Tante Pruit'll help me prove it."

The sheriff looked down at the desperate, panic-stricken Breaux. "That true, Breaux?— Say it's true. Confess it, an' I'll take you outa there."

Just then a garfish with his long, saw-like snout, must have taken a sample of Breaux's leg, somewhere under the water, for he screamed:

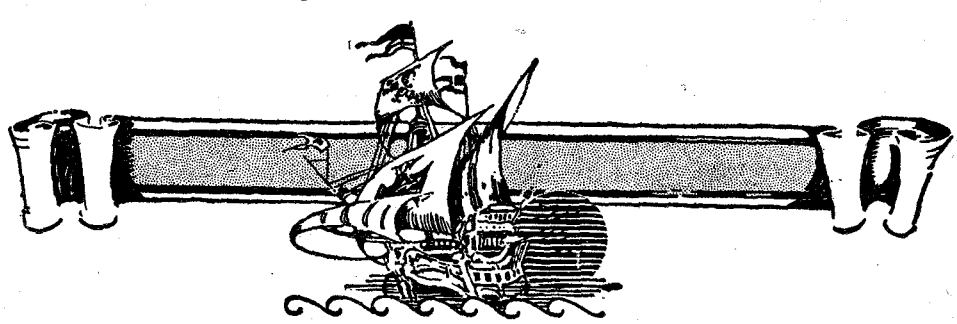
"Get me out!— I confess it! I did it as he says."

So they piled him into the boat and put handcuffs on him.

On the way back they picked up the living but badly battered Pete, and they took old Tante Pruit along as a witness. Jean recovered his overturned boat and towed the two *pirogues* along behind

Mushrat Pete was sober, when he woke up in the hospital, and he swore he'd never touch liquor again. They let him go free, but they put Jacques Breaux where he wouldn't be able to get a drink if he wanted one. In a couple of weeks old Papa Vallon was as good a little man as he'd ever been, and Tante Pruit had a brand new skiff, made for her by the gratefully able hands of Jean Vallon.

THE END



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MEN of DARING
STO. ALLEN
SMOKE EATER!
New York's first fire commissioner from the uniformed ranks, Chief John J. McElligott has been fighting fires for nearly 30 years—and he loves the work!
BORN IN 1882 IN VERMONTVILLE, N.Y., HE STUDIED ENGINEERING FOR TWO YEARS AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY. GOING TO NEW YORK CITY IN 1905 HE JOINED HOOK AND LADDER COMPANY 8. HE ROSE BY SHEER MERIT TO ENGINEER, LIEUTENANT, CAPTAIN, FIREBOAT COMMANDER, BATTALION CHIEF, DEPUTY CHIEF, AND ASSISTANT CHIEF. HE BECAME CHIEF IN 1932 AFTER RATING HIGHEST IN A STIFF COMPETETIVE CIVIL SERVICE TEST
JOHN McELLIGOTT
DECORATED 5 TIMES FOR BRAVERY!
IN A WAREHOUSE FIRE ONE BITTER COLD NIGHT IN FEBRUARY, 1906, HE AND OTHERS OF HIS COMPANY ESCAPED DEATH BY SOME MIRACLE WHEN A FLOOR COLLAPSED, THROWING THEM 20 FEET INTO THE CELLAR. AT THE EQUITABLE BUILDING FIRE IN JANUARY, 1912, McELLIGOTT, ENGINEER ON A STEAM FIRE ENGINE, STUCK TO HIS POST 38 HOURS IN ZERO WEATHER PUMPING WATER.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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PICKED IN 1914 BY CHIEF KENLON TO ORGANIZE NEW YORK'S FIRST FIRE RESCUE SQUAD, JACK McELLIGOTT MADE FIRE-FIGHTING HISTORY. HE CAPTAINED A FIREBOAT DURING THE WORLD WAR AMONG VESSELS FILLED WITH HIGH EXPLOSIVES.
IN 1920, AFTER A FUEL EXPLOSION AT THE MOUTH OF NEWTOWN CREEK, BROOKLYN, HIS FIREBOAT GOT CAUGHT IN A RIVER OF FIRE, FORCING HIM AND HIS MEN TO RETREAT DOWN INTO THE VESSELS BLISTERING STEEL HULL WHILE ANOTHER FIREBOAT TOWED THEM TO SAFETY BARELY IN TIME.
HIS CLOSEST CALL WAS IN FEBRUARY, 1930, WHEN HE FOUGHT FIRE AND EXPLOSIONS ABOARD THE NITRATE-FILLED LINER MUENCHEN AT HER MANHATTAN DOCK. HELPING TO CARRY THE HOSE LINES INTO THE HOLD HIMSELF, HE PREVENTED A BLAST IN THE MAIN STORE OF EXPLOSIVES. BUT HE WAS CAUGHT IN ANOTHER BLAST THAT BLEW HIM TO THE DECK THROUGH A VENTILATOR. 40 OF HIS MEN WERE KNOCKED OUT, AND ONE, JOHN HARVEY, WAS BLOWN FROM THE FIREBOAT TO HIS DEATH.
DECORATED 5 TIMES FOR BRAVERY, McELLIGOTT IS NOW BOTH CHIEF AND FIRE COMMISSIONER. MAYOR LA GUARDIA ADVANCED HIM TO THE LATTER POST LAST DECEMBER.

Next Week: Capt. John Blair, War Flyer

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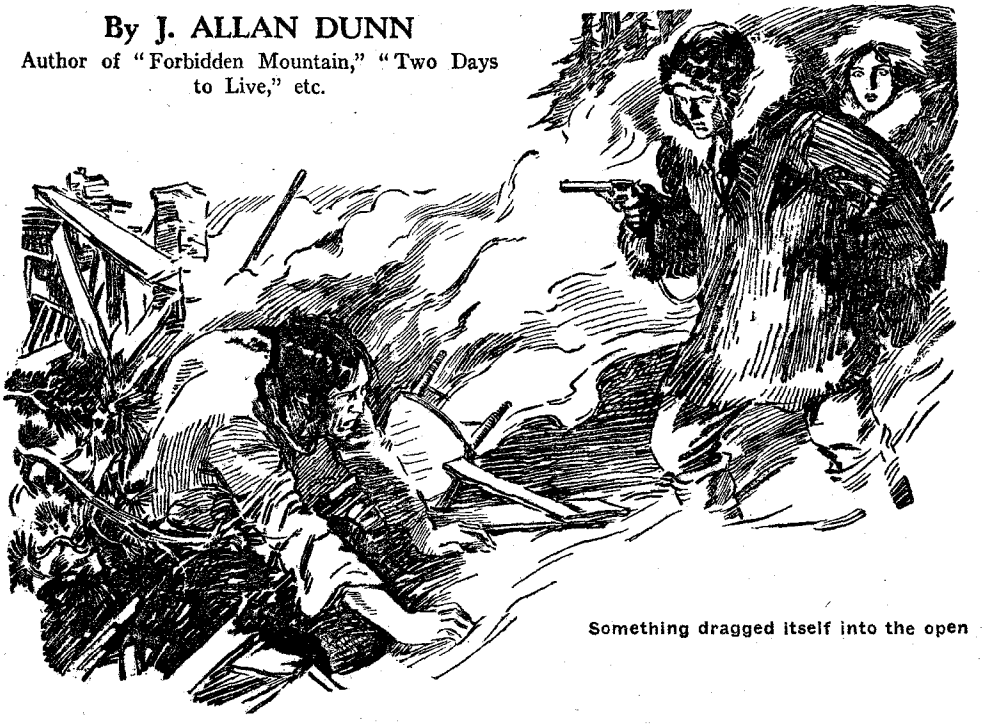
Shaman's Trail

By J. ALLAN DUNN
Author of "Forbidden Mountain," "Two Days to Live," etc.



Something dragged itself into the open

Corporal Shane, Northwest Mounty, was intent on unmasking the real trouble-makers of his post

LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

WHEN Corporal Jerry Shane received his first command at the Mackenzie River Post, he moved into the territory bent on reasserting the authority of the Mounted. With him, as special constable and interpreter, went that faithful old Eskimo, Quitlik.

Almost immediately Shane discovered that his rule was threatened from at least two sources. One of these was from an Aleut shaman named Shappa, who had recently risen to power and was stirring up trouble among the natives. The other threat came from a mysterious man who called himself Gregory Krim. It did not take Shane long to discover that Krim was in reality an agent of the Soviet Government, sent into the North to trail one Alexis Kolitsin, a Czarist refugee known in the Mackenzie district as Basil Dorn. The Soviet Government was seeking certain valuable family jewels which Kolitsin was supposed to have either hidden or smuggled out of the country.

Kolitsin (alias Dorn) was suffering from an old wound, and for some time had been cared for and nursed by Nellie Chadwick, niece of the Scotch trader, Alec Ferguson. He was therefore badly handicapped when Krim flew into the district in a plane piloted by a man named Folger, who claimed that he was in the employ of the Boreas Power Company. Shane, however, arrived on the scene in time to prevent serious harm to Kolitsin, though the Mounty himself narrowly escaped death.

Shane gradually recovered from the attack, only to learn from Trader Ferguson's

This story began in the Argosy for August 18

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half-witted native servant, Inoocheak, that Nellie Chadwick had disappeared. Ferguson himself, being bedridden, was unable to search for her.

Going to Kolitsin's shack, Quitlik and Shane found signs of a struggle, and from the shack were able to trail the girl and the Russian, who had also disappeared, to an ancient stone igloo, reputedly haunted by spirits. There they found the pair held prisoners by Krim and a troublesome half-breed known as The Hawk. In the fight that ensued, Krim was killed, but The Hawk escaped. Burdened as they were by the girl and the injured Russian, Shane and Quitlik could not pursue The Hawk. But shortly after they left the igloo they sighted a fire, apparently at Ferguson's place, many miles distant.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SAGA OF INOOCHEAK.

THEY went kiting; down, up, and over the muskeg hummocks. Kolitsin refused to burden the sled and kept up as the dogs hauled the lightened burden with all the reserves left in them, stimulated by their last snatch of salmon, and by Quitlik's writhing whip that threatened but did not touch them. He ran alongside them, chanting to them.

Shane went on ahead, spurred, and at the same time sickened, by the fear he would arrive too late. He supposed that Inoocheak would have started back from the barracks soon after they themselves had left, at the first moment he was able to travel. The hunchback had a faithful heart, but the fire might have started before he arrived.

Ferguson could barely manage to creep about and fend for himself. He might have started the fire by the accidental overturning of a lamp or the neglect of a stove while he slept, exhausted. He might have been trapped, unable to escape.

And, remembering how he had found the Hawk and Khatu, the Dogrib full-blood, in the store, Shane feared that it might be the result of an Indian raid. It was many years since anything like that had happened, but it was always a possibility to be considered, with the growing discontent among the tribesmen — fostered by Shappa the Shaman.

He did not think it would be Eskimos. They were the happiest people in the world, contented with their circumstances. They had once occupied the forest region north of Lake Superior, but the Yellowknives, Slaveys, Chippewans and Dogribs had chased them to the icy sea-islands. They had returned now, to some extent, but they had little sympathy with the Athabascan branches; they considered themselves superior, and they were.

As Shane stood for a moment, looking through a break in the spruces at the store, Kolitsin and the girl caught up with him.

There was not much left of the building, stoutly built though it had been. The big logs of the walls had mostly fallen in, but they were still blazing. And here and there, at the corners where they were notched and mortised together, they still defied the flames. A few sturdy uprights remained, charred to mere sticks, but the roof had fallen in, and the whole interior was a mass of fire.

It looked like Indian deviltry. In wanton destruction they would have looted or spoiled what they could not take; and they would have found the alcohol they knew was somewhere there, then set fire to the place, their savagery let loose by the liquor. At such times they were fiends. They would kill for the sheer pleasure of it. If they had happened to find the girl

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there, her fate would have been as hideous as the one the Hawk had contemplated for her—and multiplied by just so many times as there were Indians in the raid.

Shane knew how he felt toward the Hawk on that count. Krim had suggested it sufficiently. The corporal would not have been sorry to shoot the Hawk and kill him, rather than Krim; but a Mounty never shoots without sufficient excuse.

Krim had attacked him; had meant to kill him. The Hawk had moved only to escape. There was enough against the Hawk to commit him, but so far as was known he had not yet murdered anybody. He had done nothing to be hanged for.

Kolitsin might consider the punishment of the Hawk, because of what he had meant to do to the girl, his own affair. But Shane was the law, the Hawk belonged to him.

The girl laid her hand upon his arm. He had given her back her mitten. Her face, faintly ruddy from the glow of the fire, was fearful.

"Do you think my uncle is dead?" she asked. "Lately rheumatism has attacked his heart and left him powerless to help himself. I have been worrying about him every minute, since they took Alexis and me to that awful place. I ought never to have left him at all.—But there was Inoocheak. How did you happen to go to the store and find out I was missing?"

IN the stress of the rescue there had been no time for explanations. Now he told her, briefly, of Inoocheak's fight through the storm.

"He might have got back," he said.

"Then he would have saved my uncle. Let's find him."

Quitlik came up with the sled. Shane spoke to him in the Mackenzie River jargon, a kind of beach-English which employs many Indian and Eskimo words, not to alarm the girl unduly. Quitlik agreed with what Shane said, that this might be Indian mischief and that it was more likely to be that than accident. Ill or not, Ferguson was a careful man who did not believe in taking risks at any time. It was well for them to go carefully. Even if the actual raiders were far away, others might come to see what they could find, and these also would be out of control.

All seemed quiet—ominously so. There was no call from Ferguson, nor from Inoocheak; only the sound of the fire, the noise of the remaining logs and beams collapsing.

As they came closer, the signs of looting were unmistakable to Shane and Quitlik. Goods were scattered wantonly on the ground, dragged out of the store, discarded. Flour sacks had been hacked by tomahawks and knives, cases broken open, cans tossed all about.

"Inoocheak must have been here!" the girl cried out. "He has tried to save what he could."

Shane shook his head, his face stony.

"You think they carried him off?" she asked pitifully.

"I don't know," said Shane. "We must find out."

He dreaded to think of what charred remains might be in the ruins.

There was a rustle in some low evergreens, and Shane swung about, his gun ready. Something dragged itself into the open. It was Inoocheak, wounded, half frozen, despite the great heat from the flames. His face was smeared with congealed blood.

Shane had brought along the caribou

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and he used it on the hunchback, who seemed more of a halfwit than ever, completely dazed and unable to talk at all. He sat wrapped in the blankets they put about him, shivering and staring at the fire. Either he would not or could not tell them where he was wounded. There was blood all over him, but the cold had checked its flow. Shane could not tell whether he was actually crippled or merely weak from loss of the vital fluid.

Inoocheak looked stupidly at Nellie Chadwick, when she began to speak to him, imploring him to talk to her and to tell what had happened. Shane gave him another drink, risking making him drunk. It might rouse him; it could not make him more stupid.

Tears began to trickle down the hunchback's bloody cheeks. He would not talk directly to the girl, though they understood each other well enough on ordinary occasions. Instead, he spoke to Quitlik, his countryman, in their own language. Shane caught words here and there, and was able to link them together. He got the outline of the tragedy but said nothing, listening, his arms folded, his face grim.

The girl stood beside Kolitsin, sobbing gently. Inoocheak's grief had started her own. She did not need to understand the expressive and melodious, if somewhat guttural, sounds of one of the most difficult and complex of languages.

Inoocheak, his voice gathering strength, spoke with dramatic emphasis, with a broken rhythm suggestive of drumbeats. His declamation had beauty and dignity; it was inspired. And the intuition of the girl allowed her to follow it closely. She turned to Kolitsin for comfort and he took her in his arms.

Then Inoocheak's oration began to falter, and his voice fell to a whisper, died away. He had sat huddled in the blankets; now he collapsed utterly.

Quitlik grasped him, and Shane sprang to aid. But nothing could be done. Nothing could revive Inoocheak. He had lived long enough to tell his tale, his *saga,* and his last word had come with his last breath.

IT was astounding that he could have lived so long. The will of the halfwit had been strong enough to hold Death at bay. He had been shot through both thighs, and stabbed in the chest three times. One of the knife wounds had reached his heart muscles.

"He says," translated Quitlik, when they were sure that Inoocheak was beyond all help, "that he knew we would come before he died.—He says"—Quitlik used the Eskimo idiom of speaking of the newly dead as if they were still existent, their spirits hovering near—"that he talked with his ghost and that it promised him he should not die with his tale untold.

"It was yesterday he returned to this place and found that his master was well, but much worried. The words of Inoocheak were good to his ears, the safe arrival of Inoocheak, the news that we had gone to find out about his niece, were like medicine to him.

"He had strength enough to come into the store on a cane, when the Dogribs arrived. Now that is the tribe of the Hawk."

Shane knew that the last sentence was Quitlik's own. He did not miss its significance.

"They had taken hold of Inoocheak and were pushing him among themselves," Quitlik went on. "They demanded tobacco, alcohol, sugar. It was plain they wanted everything, that they meant to take it by force.

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"They spoke of the visit of Khatu and the Hawk. They also spoke of Shappa the Shaman. The land, and all that was in it and upon it, belonged to them. Khatu was with them and he did the loudest boasting and threatening.

"It was Khatu who killed Ferguson. He did this with an ax that was for sale at the store. It was a chopping ax with two edges. Khatu swung it up and brought it down so that it split Ferguson's head. It split his skull and the stroke ended in the lower jaw, between his teeth."

The girl shuddered convulsively, and Shane warned Quitlik. To the Eskimo it seemed he had not offended. He had meant to show that Ferguson had died immediately, without suffering. His own women did not have the imagination of the white girl, nor her swiftness to conjure up the scene.

"SO he died," Quitlik continued. "Then they turned upon Inoocheak, who had attacked Khatu. Some of them had guns, but first he was stabbed. He was shot after they flung him into the snow outside. He could not stand. He could hardly move, and the thought came to him to pretend that he was dead.

"Even then his ghost began to whisper to him, and he knew that he was going to die. So he took the blood from his wounds and wiped it all over his face. He lay face down in the snow. One of them came to him and lifted his head. He believed Inoocheak was dead.

"The Dogribs do not take scalps. They are a strange people, like the Slaveys and the Yellowknives and Chippewans. They think that white men are evil, because they eat meat that is cooked with the blood in it. For us Eskimos, who sometimes eat meat and fish raw, they hold contempt.

"So they left Inoocheak. And as his ghost counseled him, he crept little by little towards the bushes. He knew they were seeking alcohol. When they found it and drank it they might forget him. Ferguson was dead. And Inoocheak was dying. But he might crawl into the bushes and keep alive for a while.

"They had left Ferguson's body in the store. They acted as if they were madmen. They took things and threw them away again. And the fire burned so swiftly that very soon it was too late for them to choose. The wind blew so that the storehouse did not catch fire, as it had an iron door. They could not break it down, and the logs would not burn well from the outside. There was no dry brush, and the kerosene and gasoline in the store were gone."

Some supports and rafters that had been grouped in one spot now fell and showed Ferguson's big safe. The Scotchman had gone to much trouble and expense to bring that strongbox in, by river and lake and team. It was his bank. It did not seem to be damaged so far as they could see. Bolts and the door might have warped, some of the more perishable contents might or might not be charred. Probably not, for the safe, bought secondhand from a bankrupt concern, was a good one. It would be hours before it would cool off enough to be opened.

Right now, listening to the posthumous saga of Inoocheak, it did not seem important.

"Then the Hawk came, with dogs and a sled. He was very angry and he called them fools. Especially did he quarrel with Khatu. At first they did not listen to him, until he mentioned Shappa's name. Shappa had cautioned them against anything like this, until the right moment came, said the Hawk.

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He claimed he was a member of Shappa's secret council. Now *they* would be surprised, instead of surprising the white men. They would be scattered, unless they were careful, unless they did what he told them.

"Some of them challenged him, but the Hawk promised that Shappa himself would announce that they were to take the Hawk as their leader. The Hawk spoke of the strongbox. 'You have broken the shell and left the meat,' he told them. 'Now it may not be touched for a long time and this fire may be seen.' He spoke strong words to them and they listened to him, for they felt like the fools he called them.

"Then the Hawk came with Khatu to where Inoocheak lay. He called him an Eskimo dog, and before he turned him over he kicked him.—Now, those who have thought Inoocheak small of wit have been wrong, for he played dead, as a man does on the ice when a bear charges. But he knew enough to keep his eyes open, as a dead man will. He stared at them, unwinking, at the Hawk. He did not breathe, which was not hard, for he had little breath left. And his ghost whispered to him all the time.

"The Hawk laughed. 'You killed the other, Khatu? You are sure he is dead?'

"Khatu said, 'He is twice dead. I can show you what is left of him in the fire!'"

THE girl shuddered, clinging closer to Kolitsin. Quitlik went on.

"'That part is good, Khatu,' said the Hawk, 'that both are dead. But the fire was a foolish thing'—And Khatu answered that it was not his fault; that he had spoken with but two of the tribe and one of them had told his wife, so that the news spread. They held Khatu back until they all talked it over. They needed tobacco and sugar, they craved the alcohol and other things in the store. They had been inflamed by Shappa's words, and the young men won the talk. 'So,' said Khatu, 'there was delay'—and he could not hold them. 'I will hold them,' said the Hawk.—Now the fire was too fierce for them to take more, and they listened to him.

"'Shappa will come to your village, it may be the second night from now, or the third, and he will speak to you through the dead head of Nitlook. You shall see the dead come to life, and the dead lips speak the mysteries of the spirit world. Then will Nitlook tell you that you are to obey me in all things. Now go to your village, swiftly, and hide the things that you have taken. I go elsewhere, with Khatu.'

"That is all," said Quitlik. "It was then he died."

"It is plenty," said Shane.

Inoocheak had not fought to live in vain. The Hawk was somehow linked with Shappa. He might be fond of boasting, but it did not seem probable that he would state definitely that the "dead head" would name him leader if he did not have some understanding with the shaman. Although he might have lied to get them away from the burned post, and to make them afraid to return.

Their village, according to Quitlik, was a two days' sled journey away. It would give the Hawk time to try to get into Ferguson's safe. The danger of the fire having been seen and reported was not so great as he had painted it. For most of the time the snow would have blanketed it at any distance.

It seemed evident that the Hawk had plotted with Khatu to kill both

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Ferguson and Inoocheak. He could not have known that Inoocheak would dare to journey to the barracks, though he might have guessed it, after Shane's arrival at the igloo.

Yet he had known that, sooner or later, Ferguson would tell of the disappearance of his niece. That might be blamed on Kolitsin, but the Hawk preferred to make sure. He and Khatu both had a grudge against Ferguson. Inoocheak they regarded no more than an Eskimo dog who must also be silenced. Khatu had not wanted to tackle the job alone; there had been talk, delay, and then the raid.

The vital thing to Shane was that Shappa was to visit the Dogrib Village soon. If the shaman was a true wizard he would not arrive until the raiders had got back.

Shane turned to the others. "It is important that I be at the Dogrib Village when Shappa comes," he told them. "You have heard what Quitlik has said. The Hawk will be there to take over the leadership, unless he lied to them. He is ambitious and he is clever. He may think that they can fight long enough for him to get the best of the loot for himself and then he will leave the tribesmen to their punishment. He is not one of them, although he is of their blood. But because he is part Indian they will follow him if Shappa says so through the 'dead head.'

"And then there will be more killings, more posts burned. With success, they will grow more daring before we can bring in enough force to wipe out the rebellion. It can be nipped now—by exposing Shappa. To get there I must use these dogs and the sled, when the dogs are rested. Otherwise I would send Miss Chadwick and Prince Kolitsin back to the barracks with Quitlik. But I need Quitlik too. It is my duty. I am sorry . . ."

"You need not be sorry for me," said the girl. "They have killed my uncle, and Inoocheak. As you say, others may be murdered. We will go with you. I may not be able to do much, but I will try not to be a hindrance. And Alexis will go also, will you not, Alexis?"

"Of course," said Kolitsin. "Perhaps I can help. I could do better if I had a weapon. At least I can use one—and I am well enough. There are times when illness does not count—when it retreats."

SHANE eyed him admiringly. He was not sure that the other could stand the trip. That was his own risk, however. Shane would let the girl go along, for he could not change the situation. And at the worst Kolitsin and the girl could be sent back when they got to the village, providing Quitlik thought they could handle the dogs.

"I've got Krim's automatic," he said to the Russian, "and two extra clips which I found upon him. You may have those."

He managed to whisper to Kolitsin as the latter took the gun.

"We'll manage to keep the wolves away from Inoocheak," he said. "It will be best for Miss Chadwick not to see that. It may remind her that we have to leave her uncle's remains here in the ruins of the fire. She is a wonderful girl, but she has gone through a lot."

Kolitsin gripped Shane's hand. He stepped back and ceremoniously saluted the corporal.

"You are right," he said cryptically, "she is a wonderful woman, and she deserves all that may come to her. You are a man of resource, and also of

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thoughtfulness, Shane. I shall be glad if I may call you my friend."

Shane saluted Kolitsin in turn. It seemed a little trite, even a little melodramatic, but they were both actors in a tragedy that might be leavened by romance. Kolitsin was the romantic hero, Shane told himself, though not bitterly. Kolitsin was all of a man.

Shane and Quitlik wrapped the body of Inoocheak in its blankets. They set the stiffening form, which the weather would preserve, in a platform made between the spruces, using Quitlik's hand ax and the hide lashings used for mending dog leads. There the body would be safe from the wolves.

Shane and Quitlik searched for supplies among the things the half-drunken raiders had thrown about. There was enough. The storehouse might hold more, but the keys to that were in the fire, perhaps on Ferguson's charred body.

The night was clearing. The fickle wind had shifted again. They made a meal, and Shane insisted upon their resting. They made bivouac, with the fire dying slowly, giving out warmth. Shane had brought extra sleeping bags from the barracks. The dogs curled down, grateful for the rest. Over their sleeping heads the Aurora wheeled and shook.

When Shane woke suddenly, warned by some sentinel sense, he heard a humming sound, like that of a swarm of bees. Quitlik, beside him, was also sitting up. And again, across the floating glory of the Aurora, they saw a flying airplane. It was low, and when it banked it was close enough for them to distinguish the landing skis. It showed no lights. It was only a shape against the shimmering fringes of the static display.

It circled, seeming to examine the fire, now more visible from above than on the level. Then it zoomed off, going north, and soon melted into the night.

That, Shane told himself, was Folger's plane, bound for some rendezvous with Krim—Krim, lying stark in the stone igloo. But the Hawk might be there to meet the flier with a plausible tale. The Hawk had learned enough in the igloo, and from Krim as well, to see himself taking Krim's place in an attempt to force out of Kolitsin the hiding place of his treasure.

That would appeal to the Hawk, and it might appeal to Folger. The Hawk would trick Folger, after he had used him; but he might include Shappa on the deal. They might use the insurrection as a cover, or they might hold it off; but they would not give up trying for Kolitsin.

Shane could imagine that the plane had been south for repairs, for oil and gas. Its flying radius was limited. It certainly was not a mail plane, for none was due. The routes did not come that way.

Things were beginning to link up. He must warn Kolitsin of this new danger from the Hawk. Kolitsin was an alien, but Shane would protect him, even as a rival. Shane set all romance behind him. He did not think much of his own hopes in that line. It was better to squelch them; easier now, because of the tense action forward.

IT looked as if the key to several problems might be found in the Dogrib village.

While Quitlik made a fire he found a chance to tell Kolitsin his ideas about the Hawk. The girl was sleeping.

"I thank you again, my friend," said the Russian. "You are generous. Perhaps you will not be unrewarded."

He spoke with deep feeling, but

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Shane laughed it off. He could not always fathom the other, with his foreign reactions and emotions.

"We turn all rewards in to the general fund in the Service," Shane said. He had an idea that Kolitsin might embarrass him by offering him a jewel; that he might make him a Knight of St. Michael, or something of the sort.

"I doubt if you would want to share this reward, even if you get it," said Kolitsin, a twinkle in his dark eyes. "I shall try to take care of myself. And if you take over that plane, don't forget that I am a flyer. We may return in fine style."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GHOST LODGE.

TWO of the dogs went lame. They had to be either sacrificed or carried on the sled. That slowed progress. Besides, the girl could not travel at the speed of Shane and Quitlik, and the going was bad. Kolitsin held out well, though Shane was sure he must be exhausted. The Mounty called for halts now and then, and once insisted upon inspecting the Russian's wound and redressing it. It was not draining properly.

All these things held them back. Quitlik led the way unerringly, but Shane feared that daylight would come before they reached the village, and that the shaman would have held his séance. The Dogribs would have followed the Hawk's advice and buried what they had looted. There would be no evidence, and the Hawk might have flown.

They were making a sharp traverse across the muskeg tundra, leaving it to come into slightly rolling country where dwarf spruces furred the low ridges. Shane watched the stars, fearing to see the first graying of the eastern sky. They had, he figured, two hours in hand. Little enough.

Then Quitlik grunted. They had reached the river that ran close to the Dogrib village. The three dogs dragged the sled down to the frozen surface, almost clear of snow. Now they made better time.

Quitlik was the first to hear the drums. *Tum-tum-tum-tumma-tumma-tum! Tum-tumma-tum! Tum-tumma-tum!* Devil-drums. Drums for summoning spirits, like the drums in the stone igloo. Shaman's drums. They sounded thin, almost tinny, but there was no mistaking them.

"It is here," said Quitlik.

They helped the dogs up the gap in the river bank, the girl aiding. Shane looked for the plane, but the plateau was dotted with clumps of spruce. This was the village of the Dogribs. No lights showed, but the tribe was surely awake, listening with dread to the drums that were summoning the spirits of the dead. They dared not venture forth lest the spirits molest them at the will of the shaman—until the beat of the drums changed, bade them gather in the ghost lodge.

It was not hard for a shaman—or any one not afraid of the night—to enter the village at such an hour and erect a tent. Shane considered the black ghost lodge as that, rather than a teepee which took time to erect the poles and trouble to carry them.

Ghosts haunted the dark. A man might see them and die. Such matters were black magic, fit only for wizards to encounter and control, until the shaman proclaimed the way was clear. Even then an awful thing.

The village was permanent. There

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were houses, some of them skin lodges, and some wickiups of wattled willows, shaped like beehives and cemented with mud.

The Aurora was in full display, projecting its clustering rods. Its music was muted by the drums. Their rhythm changed. Quitlik touched Shane's arm. He had muzzled the dogs. Men were stealing across the snow, one by one. In groups and files they came together, making for a tall cone of black cloth, or canvas.

This was the ghost-lodge. Shappa was there; the spirit of Nitlook, perhaps. At least a "dead head," which it was claimed was the head of Nitlook. Presently it would come to life, and it might proclaim the Hawk as leader.

"YOU will look after Miss Chadwick?" Shane asked Kolitsin.

"I'll have to see inside that lodge. Quitlik will come with me. If there is trouble, you will know it soon enough."

"I thought we might cast around for the plane," said Kolitsin. "I mean Nellie and myself. The dogs are quiet."

Shane considered. That might help. If the plane was there, he thought the Hawk had arrived in it; also perhaps Khatu, with Folger.

"Go ahead," he said. "But not until they are all in the lodge."

They stayed in the slight hollow they had chosen. There was little fear that any Dogrib would stray aside. To them, the night swarmed with ghosts.

The drum rhythm changed again. No more blanketed forms appeared, and so Shane and Quitlik stole toward the black lodge, ready to drop upon their bellies. Now the sound of the drums was mingled with the shrill note of flutes, high-pitched, eerie.

"It is not like any Indian music I have heard," whispered Quitlik.

"I know," Shane answered. He did not really know, but there was something stirring in his brain—a memory. He thought he had heard such sounds before, though he could not place them. Vaguely, he knew their source. They were indescribably weird. Heard at this hour, and in such surroundings, they were fraught with mystery, with hints of ancient, savage rites. Ghostly, ghastly music.—If One-Foot-in-Hell had been right, there were no performers.

The black ghost-lodge was pegged down with enough guy ropes. Its spreading folds were pinned to the hard snow. Not a glimpse of light showed through any opening. They knew the entrance, and avoided it. There was no outer guard, no need for one. Spirits were sentinels.

With infinite care Shane loosened a peg, then another, and a third. He and Quitlik wriggled under the canvas, met an inner lining. They made burrows for themselves in the snow, their bodies below the packed surface. They were like hunters creeping up on seals on the pack ice.

Slowly they lifted the lighter cloth, hooded in their parka tops, draped in the second canvas. The music, if it could be called that, was muted now. Flickering lights played here and there, fitful and hidden gleams of blue and green, or red and purple. They seemed to come from the loose folds of the inner tent, like will-o'-the-wisps, or corposants.

SHAPPA, the shaman, stood back of a stand raised on a tripod. Behind him the lodge was empty. On the stand there stood a carved box—a skull-casket.

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He was a fearsome sight. He wore a headdress of fur, from which shining horns curved out. His face was black and glistening. It glowed slightly, like fungus. His eyes gleamed.

Squatted in rows, hunkered down and swathed in blankets, crowding the front third of the lodge, were the Dogrib braves. Thigh against thigh, unmoving, entranced, as close as peas in a pod. More than twenty of them and less than thirty, Shane estimated.

Their fascinated eyes watched Shappa, the whites showing duskily as the orbs rolled. If hypnosis had anything to do with this séance, they were in a fit mood, and under the influence of the unknown; as receptive as converts to a medium. They were waiting to hear the dead speak.

Shane could not distinguish the Hawk, but he believed him to be present. Now and then the fitful lights reflected from some warrior's gaze in a red or green glaze, like spangles.

Shappa had all of a master conjurer's manner. He opened the lid of the casket and brought out a dried head, withered and mummified. The cheekbones were stretched beneath the dry skin; yellow teeth showed behind lips that were like shreds of leather. The eyes were closed, the orbs dessicated behind the sunken lids.

Shappa set the casket on the ground, and held up the head for all to see. He spoke in Dogrib dialect, and Shane was hard to put to it to follow him. But Quitlik understood, and now and then he whispered to Shane. The warriors were too rapt to be disturbed by this exchange, and Shappa was intent upon forcing his will upon them. Quitlik's whisper was less than the rustle of a leaf.

The head of Nitlook was passed from hand to hand. It came back to the shaman. The music strengthened. Shane thought there was a definite theme to it, repeated at long intervals. Presently it would come to him where he had heard this barbaric iteration before. It was old—old as Time, measured by man.

Shappa the shaman set the head of Nitlook—if it was ever Nitlook's, though that scarcely mattered—upon a shallow, wooden dish. He placed a sable scarf about the dish and the shriveled neck. He raised his arms, as if in invocation.

A low moan came from the top of the tent. Whispering, squeaking noises followed. Shane saw the wizard's throat quiver slightly and suspected ventriloquism, common enough in shaman séances. But the Dogribs shuddered as they huddled. Here were spirits, doing the bidding of Shappa for good or evil.

Shappa bowed over the head, and waved his arms. He dropped them to his sides. He wore a black robe, and his hands were a dull black, as if gloved, so that his movements were hard to trace in the flickering lights.

Suddenly the lights went out, as a moan changed to a wail. They showed again, and the withered head now shone with a livid blue film. Its features seemed to quiver.

"Nitlook, who is dead, returns to life," said the Shaman in a deep, hollow voice.

It was impressive enough. Even Shane felt his flesh pimpling, and invisible hairs lifting at the base of his neck. He heard Quitlik suck in his breath.

The mummied cranium was becoming animated; the lips writhed, the eyelids blinked. Amazingly, it was fast becoming a living head—set on a shallow dish, scarved in black. The space

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beneath the stand was empty, apparently.

Shappa stood back. "Nitlook speaks," he boomed. "He brings a message from the spirit world. This you must obey, or your lips will be sealed in death, as his were—and yours will be sealed forever."

The voice that issued from the head was harsh and unnatural, but plain. There was no question that it came from those blue lips. It was jerky, but it was human. Yet it was not *superhuman,* Shane thought, though the warriors believed it so.

"This talk is brief. It may be my last, for my talk has not been obeyed—this is spirit talk. A ghost speaks truly. It is not well to refuse to listen to the words of a ghost."

SHANE was reminded of some one reciting a lesson or a speech, and a none too apt scholar at that. He had heard such voices over the radio, when some one, more famous in action than in words, spoke to his "public." But this was not a radio trick, as the Mounty had at first imagined it might be.

The head was now living flesh. Its muscles synchronized exactly with the syllable. This strange spectacle was not an illusion.

Suddenly Shane's own mind coördinated, and he placed the origin of the weird music, muted once more. He knew how the dead head of Nitlook spoke—

His hand gripped the butt of his gun. He nudged Quitlik, whispering to him.

"I am going to lay this ghost, Quitlik. Do you know what I mean?—Wait until I make a move."

It did not matter whether or not Quitlik understood the "laying" of a ghost. He was shrewd. He might not know the exact phrase, but he guessed cleverly. And he nudged Shane in reply to give a sign that he understood.

The ghastly head went on speaking. "There are those here who have disobeyed me, who dared to consult their own minds, and to strike too soon. I can be with you only at certain times. In the land of spirits, we have our own affairs. Permission must be sought to help those below. This I tell you, this I set upon you, to follow him whom the ghosts have chosen because of his magic power. He who is known as the Hawk.

"Strike not until the Hawk gives the word. Riches shall then be yours, and the land which the white man stole from you shall be restored—those who do not—those who do not . . ."

The voice faltered. Shane was quick to notice that the talking head needed prompting. It had forgotten its lesson. He saw Shappa bow over it; heard a moan that covered the slip. Then the head went on again.

"Death shall be theirs—a shameless death. Their children shall perish. Their women shall be made slaves.—The Hawk must lead you. He knows your ways; also the ways of the white man. Follow him. Nitlook has spoken! The white man shall be swept from the land. Nitlook has spoken! The tribes shall flourish. Nitlook has spoken!"

"And now the *white man* speaks!" cried Shane.

He spoke in English, knowing they all understood well enough. He rose, flinging the folds of the lining back of him, and Quitlik stood beside him. The corporal's voice held authority, absolute and imperative.

"You think this is Nitlook?—I will show you!" he explained.

Shappa strove to rally the braves,

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but they were in dazed confusion. Some tried to rise.

"Are you afraid of one white man, and of an Eskimo," he jeered. "They come as spies—but they cannot avail against my magic."

Shane saw him fumbling in his robe.

"I shall show you a white man's magic!" cried Shane. "Do not move, head of Nitlook."

The tripod was rising, as Shane's gun barked. He fired between the legs of the stand, and glass shattered, breaking the illusion of vacancy below. The legs of a man who had been seated on a stool beneath were now plain. One of those legs gave way, and the whole contraption toppled.

"Get him, Quitlik!" Shane shouted.

Shappa the shaman got a weapon from beneath his robe. But the lights had gone out with the toppling of the stand, and the music had ceased. A jet of flame came through the blackness, and Shane felt a blow, high on his shoulder. He fired back, then crouched and dived for Shappa as the shaman yelled: "Kill! *Kill!*"

The ghost-lodge swayed. Frantic warriors milled as the pegs gave way and the canvas came down. Shane closed with his man, spread-eagled him, and found himself tossed off. It was a furious struggle. The Mounty pinned the gloved gunhand of the shaman, smashed at him with his gun, not wanting to take him dead. He was sure that he had wounded him, but the man fought like a trapped wolf, and Shane himself was hurt.

They fought muffled in the tumbled canvas. Others dragged at Shane. At least one of the tribesmen had brought a knife to the séance; it stabbed through Shane's thigh. With his unhurt leg he kicked out, and heard the breath go out of the man.

Then he got his hands at the shaman's throat. He dropped his gun for the moment, sure of victory. His thumbs closed down on the man's jugular vein and the vagus nerve; finding them, he set out all his strength, while the shaman writhed and suddenly went limp. A little more, and Shane would have killed him. That grip, once established, is swifter death than a bullet.

THERE were shots outside. Shane worked through the collapsed tent walls, dragging with him the unconscious shaman. The sky was now flaming with the Aurora. Shane got to his feet, though one leg was bleeding badly.

He glimpsed Kolitsin, his arm about Nellie Chadwick, gun in hand. There was a dead Dogrib on the ground, and others were running to their dwellings.

Shane called for Quitlik. He saw the special constable rise from a limp form and come forward.

"If that is Nitlook," said Quitlik grimly, "he is surely dead. For I have slit his throat—and it was the throat of Khatu, the Dogrib. These things I do not understand, save that Nitlook will speak no more, if he is Khatu."

Shane got out his torch. His hands were smeared with black and with streaks of blood. He tore off the shaman's headdress and turned the ray upon the unconscious face, made up like a minstrel, but clear enough.

"Call them back, Quitlik," he said. "Say that they will not all be punished. Tell them that Shappa is the Hawk, who spoke for himself as leader. Khatu killed Ferguson, and now he is dead. Those who helped to kill Inoocheak must be given up.—I will show them how the dead head came to life. As for Shappa the shaman who is the Hawk, he will surely hang."

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The younger men held off, but some of the elders returned. They did not quite understand what Shane told them about the mirrors between the legs of the stand, which had hidden Khatu because they reflected the black floor cloth and sides of the ghost-lodge, making it seem as if the space between the legs was clear. However, they listened to his talk of Christmas tree lights worked from a battery, and of a hidden gramophone that gave out records of Hopi ceremonial dances, all controlled by switches operated by Shappa from the stand. To what he had to say of Shappa, who was the Hawk they also listened, only dully realizing that this was a false shaman and that Shane, the white man, was the Law.

A young buck stepped forward at last. He had traveled; he had been to Edmonton, to school. Under his blankets he wore pajamas.

"Okay, corporal!" he said in his broken English. "All same we get you now. We know the Hawk too smart. He go on stage. Make plenty too much fool of us. Okay. We make a talk. Suppose we bring in men who kill Inoocheak, then we get tobacco—sugar?"

"I won't promise that, or anything," said Shane sternly. "You ought to have sense enough, you young bucks, to know the White Man is here to stay. But I'll do what I can."

Some day he would show these Dog-ribs just how the Hawk had pulled the old magician's trick of the talking head. It would come out at the half-breed's trial. But the Mounty had won; Shappa was an exploded mystery. There would be no rebellion, and Shane might get good credit out of it. The authorities at Ottawa appreciated things like this.

Now he had to get back, to carry on. Kolitsin was talking to him.

"How about leaving the sled and the dogs? You seem to have the braves under control now. I have found the plane, and I handled the pilot, after a bit of a fight. He can't fly the ship, but I can. We might leave him here.—I hit him over the head with Krim's gun. There's room for you, and Miss Chadwick. We might squeeze in Quitlik."

"That's fine," Shane said. "Quitlik will stay with Folger, to take care of him and the dogs. There'll be no more trouble. If you'll drop me at the barracks the priests 'll look after me. I've got to get a tourniquet on this thigh of mine. Then—you might go on and report to Inspector Regnier, at Edmonton. He'll handle the affair. Miss Chadwick may want to go along. Her affairs have got to be settled, too. Regnier—attend to all that—uncle's burial—Inoocheak. . . ."

"How about taking you there?"

"No—no! My place is at the post. We've still got to take in the Hawk."

"I hadn't forgotten him," said Kolitsin grimly. "He can go as baggage."

"Don't forget, he's *my* prisoner," said Shane.

He felt arms helping him to the plane, after hands had fixed the tourniquet; and he knew that some of those arms and hands belonged to Mary Chadwick. He spoke to Quitlik; he saw the Hawk set aboard; and then Kolitsin got into the pilot's pit and the plane soared, deftly handled, while above the Aurora softly crashed and sparkled.

"YOU didn't go to Edmonton?" said Shane.

"Why should I?" asked Mary Chadwick. "The inspector is here.

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They have opened my uncle's safe. There was a will inside. What he had he left to me, and it is quite a little—more than enough to keep me. We have buried him."

"That's fine," said Shane. "But why should you stay here?—Where is Kolitsin?"

"He has gone to Montreal. He has friends there. His jewels were in that safe. He had a receipt for them—they were in a sealed package. The inspector told him to take your advice and put them in a bank. Kolitsin thinks there will soon be a war, and that things will change. Then he will go back to Russia.—The Hawk is to stand trial. You know the gun you took from him? It has been traced. An Armenian trader was killed some time back, and it was his gun. They think the Hawk murdered him."

"We've got plenty on the Hawk," said Shane.

"Aren't you going to join Kolitsin?" he asked her, looking into her eyes. She did not dodge the gaze, though she reddened as she shook her head.

"Why should I?" she asked. "Did you think I was in love with him?"

Shane felt stronger. A thrill went through him.

"I seem to remember certain things that inclined me to that belief," he said.

"Then why do you think I stayed behind, Jerry? Just because I was sorry for you—because you needed nursing?"

Their eyes still held, but in hers was something of bafflement.

"Alexis left you a note," she sparred. "The doctor says you are well enough to read it."

Shane took the note in fumbling fingers which tried to hold hers. But she released her hand gently and left the room, closing the door behind her. Shane read the few lines.

My friend:

I spoke to you once of a reward I did not think you would wish to share, if it ever came to you. I know that it is yours for the asking. The one who gives you this writing can explain this, if it seems a riddle. My true regards, and lasting affection to both of you, as one. I am taking your advice, the wilderness is not for me. It is you who can control its destinies. I go to follow my own.

ALEXIS.

The door opened again. It was not Nellie Chadwick who entered, but the vigorous figure of Inspector Regnier. He had brought a surgeon up with him to treat his favorite corporal.

"They tell me you've rounded the corner, Shane," he said heartily. "You did excellent work—saved us a lot of trouble. It has all gone through to Ottawa, with a request of mine that however they choose to promote you they leave you in my district—unless you objected."

"You'd have to drive me away, sir," said Shane.

Regnier looked at him quizzically. "Fine! We can use you. And a sergeant's pay is not too bad, Shane, especially if his wife has means of her own—keep on and you won't be a sergeant long. I'm sending in your ranking commander. Since she's your nurse, I suppose I can trust her not to excite her patient too much."

Regnier swanked out, and Nellie Chadwick came back. Shane was willing to obey orders; he did not want to talk—just now. He opened his arms, tingling with new vigor, and the girl came into them.

THE END

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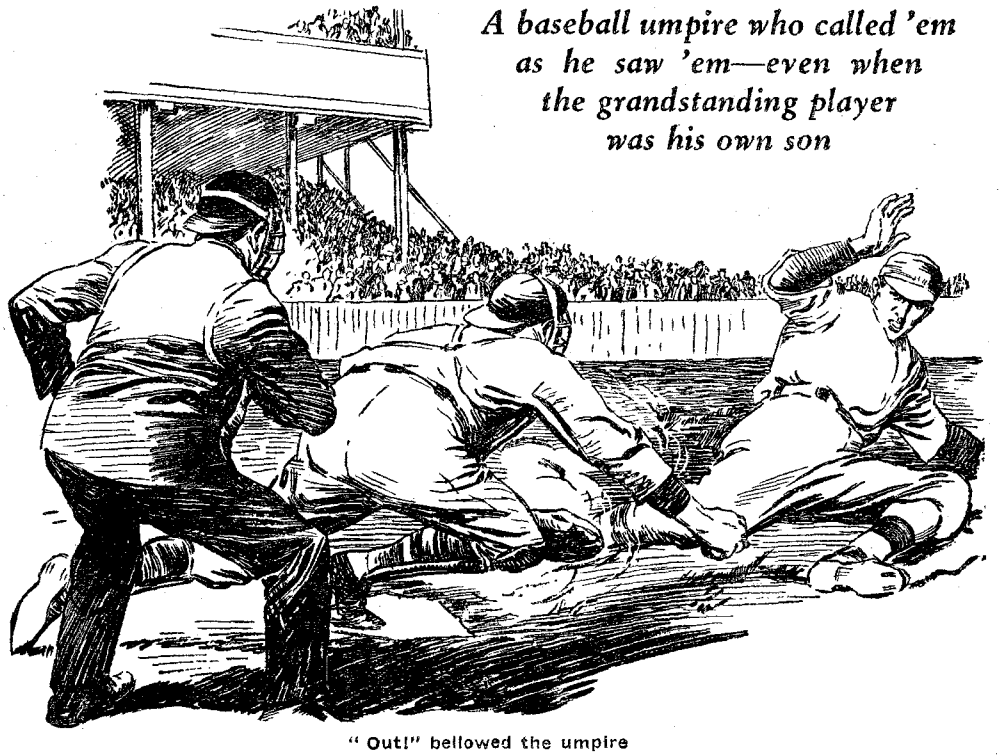
The Grandstander

By VIC WHITMAN

A baseball umpire who called 'em as he saw 'em—even when the grandstanding player was his own son



"Out!" bellowed the umpire

WITH the crack of the bat against the ball, Terry Noonan left second base and started for third. Instinctively, John Noonan, who was working the game alone, knew that the boy was going to try to make the plate; knew it because he knew his own son so well. He wanted to shout to Terry to play safe and hold up at third; that Decato was in the stands, watching. But he didn't. He couldn't. Instead, he crouched to one side of the plate, waiting to call the play.

Going a mile a minute, Terry shot over third and headed for home. That was like him—always doing the sensational, playing to the grandstand.

Straining now with the flying runner, Noonan glued his eyes to the ball which the Bears' left fielder had taken on the hop and whipped in. He waited. He couldn't call encouragement, he couldn't leap and wave his arms wildly as half the players on the Black Pirates' bench were doing, but he could and did root mentally:

"Come on, kid, come on! Faster! Now! *Now!* HIT THE DIRT!"

Straight and true, the ball took its infield bounce and shot into the catcher's hands just as Terry Noonan left his feet in his long, fade-away slide. The catcher hurled himself upon Terry, and the elder Noonan dived into the cloud of dust, arose and jerked his

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thumb over his right shoulder in a peremptory motion.

"Out!" he bellowed.

Terry got up slowly, beating the dust out of his pants, his blue eyes hard upon his father.

"That's right," he said bitterly, "ride me! G'wan an' ride me all you can!"

As always, the crowd took its cue from the player. A long-drawn "*Booooo!*" rolled from the stands while father and son faced each other, the one stolid and ruggedly honest of face, heavy-limbed and square, the other built like a racehorse, with mobile features and a grin that could be instantaneously friendly.

A moment they stood thus, eyeing each other. Then John Noonan turned away. There was nothing he could say, nothing much he wanted to say. At best there is nothing easy about an umpire's existence, even in the minor leagues, and it seemed that the Fates that govern baseball had particularly conspired against John Noonan. Since the age of ten, his ambition had been to make the major leagues as second baseman. Well on the way, at twenty-six, he had broken his arm in three places in an automobile accident, and his career as a ball player was over.

Three years later, he became an umpire; and once again hope flickered and grew that he might go to the majors as an arbitrator at least. That would have been something. But because he was reticent and taciturn, because he did not make friends easily, his chance never came—even though he was generally recognized as a four-square umpire. Others came along, developed and went up—Jimmy Regan, Art LaCase, Fred Hanrahan and the rest. They went up, he knew, because they were showmen all; because they could dramatize every decision; because they were colorful and interesting to watch. But he—well, there was just nothing colorful about him. He could only plod along, calling 'em as he saw them.

These things John Noonan had taken calmly, hiding his disappointment. But it was a bit too much when Terry came up into the Coast League from the sandlotters, and promptly started in heckling him. He knew, of course, why the boy did it. It was because Terry was a natural-born grandstander—it was because he was something of a showman, like Regan, LaCase and Hanrahan. He and his father were as different as day is from night. Terry wanted the stands to be with him in everything; consequently he made every play accordingly.

An umpire, on the other hand was the natural enemy of a baseball fan. What more natural then than that a ball player who wanted to play to the fans should ride the ump? It had been all right with John Noonan when Terry started kicking on decisions; that was all in the game. But when the boy actually began to believe that his kicks were justified; when by his very protests he had hypnotized himself into thinking that his father was giving him a raw deal, every time he called a play; when his lips curled in scorn as he looked at John Noonan—that was a bit too much.

"The kid needs to be taken down," muttered Noonan. "He needs to find out that he'll go a lot farther by shootin' off his mouth less."

THE dust cleared away, and Lefty Flynn, first baseman for the Pirates, stepped into the batter's box, grinning at Noonan.

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"Get your goggles on, John," he said. "This guy works the corners."

"Yeh?" retorted Noonan. "I'll watch the corners if you'll remember you can't hit 'em with that club on your shoulder."

That sort of kidding was all right. There was no malice in it. Even now, Lefty was chuckling over Noonan's thrust.

His last time up, in the fourth inning, he had let three fast ones go by him without moving a muscle. That sort of kidding went with the game. But when a man's son . . .

"Batter up!"

Out on the mound Tommy Fitzpatrick, ace pitcher for the Bears, took his wind-up and sent the ball hurtling in, low and on the inside.

"Strrrrrike one!"

Going good to-day, Tommy was. He had everything—a sweet hook, a deceptive change of pace, and a fast one with a hop on it. He'd certainly been pitching great ball against the league-leading Pirates, as witness the score in the sixth inning—tied at 2-2. That was pitching the sort of ball that causes an umpire to keep on his toes. As Lefty had said, Tommy was working the corners; and the man behind the catcher can make or break such delivery. Noonan wondered if Tommy could keep it up for the nine innings—with the game tightening more and more every minute.

In came the ball again, swooping like a white swallow, low and outside. It was too far out, but Lefty took a cut at it.

"Might's well," he grumbled in self-justification. "You'd called it on me, anyway."

"You'd better go take ping-pong lessons, Flynn!" John Noonan shot back at him.

A good scout, Lefty. Noonan wished that Terry was more like him.

TOMMY was winding up again. Noonan set himself for the hook. Even more quickly than the batter, an umpire gets to know what the pitcher is going to throw. A nod of the pitcher's head, a twitch of the elbow, a movement of his foot—these things sometimes foretell the pitch. In Tommy's case it was a slow clenching of his gloved hand, just at the climax of his wind-up.

The ball came in, broke sharply. Lefty stepped into it and smacked it out to short. Coming in fast, Danny Logan of the Bears scooped it up and whipped it underhand to first. A smart player, Danny. On his toes every minute. Almost as smart as Terry, and lacking only in Terry's showmanship.

Automatically, as Noonan trailed down to first, following the play, his arm went up and back.

Lefty turned aside and picked his mitt out of the coacher's box. "You look tired, John," he commented. "Everything okay?"

"Sure, fine," said Noonan.

"Decato's up in the stands."

"Yeh, I know."

"Lookin' over Terry, is he?"

"Maybe. I dunno."

The teams were changing sides. Noonan's eyes went to Terry, trotting out to his position at short. He wondered if Decato was watching the boy, too. Somewhere in the packed stands the scout was sitting. Noonan knew him as he knew most of the big league scouts. Twenty years of umpiring had given him acquaintance with them; and many times they had come to him casually, asking his opinion of this player or that. Decato had done it himself, before now. To-day, when

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Noonan met him just outside the park, he had said nothing about ball players. That meant, confirming rumors that Noonan had heard, that he was down to look over a shortstop—Terry. Boston needed a shortstop badly, to plug the only hole in its infield. Noonan knew that as well as he knew that Decato would never ask a father about his son's playing ability.

"It *would* be my day to work," reflected John Noonan, "with Decato watchin' an' with every play on the kid close."

But that was the way it had been all afternoon—close. Once or twice, by stretching his rugged honesty a bit, Noonan might have given Terry the decision. But he hadn't done it.

The first batter for the Bears stepped to the plate. Jed Thompson, slow-ball artist for the Pirates, wound up. He tossed in a floater, and the batter hit it, driving a sizzling grass-cutter to Terry's right. Like a flash the boy was over, dug the ball out of the dirt, and threw to first. Bullet-like, the ball traveled over to Lefty Flynn, dead on a line. Again the play was close, but the hawk eye of John Noonan had seen the runner's foot touch the bag simultaneously with the smack of the ball in Lefty's mitt, and his hands went down, spread wide.

Lefty stepped from the bag, tossing the ball up and down. "What's the matter, John?" he asked. "Don't you want to give the kid any kind of a break?"

"Play your bag," growled Noonan. "I'll call 'em as I see "em."

IT was one of those games that have the spectators constantly on their feet, roaring. The man on first stole second, with Terry Noonan covering the bag. Safe!

Terry glared; walked away shaking his head.

The next batter walked. Two on for the Bears, and none away. It looked like a break in the ball game. Then Jendron came up for the Bears. Thompson studied him a moment, and bore down. Two strikes, and Jendron socked one at Terry. Terry scooped it, flashed it to Harrington at second. All in one motion, Harrington took it, kicked the bag and lined it to Flynn.

Both Noonan's arms went back over his shoulders. He wanted to grin broadly. It was keen, heads-up baseball—as fast a double play as he'd seen that season. His eyes twinkled as he looked at his son. It was the nearest thing to a smile that an umpire could permit himself.

"That's the way to go, kid," he applauded inwardly. "Now you're playin' ball!"

But there was no answering twinkle in Terry's eyes, nor did his young face relax its stony hardness as he met his father's glance.

"It's a wonder you didn't muff that one, too," he said.

Noonan cringed a little from that. The boy, he reflected, took after his mother more than he did his father. She had been gifted, versatile, brilliant. In her way, she had that same flair for playing to the grandstand. Terry was like her—impulsive, voluble. He was the spring that bubbles over constantly, while his father was the still, slow-moving stream with depth and body. Never had the two thoroughly understood each other; no more had John Noonan understood his wife. Perhaps, he mused, it was his own fault that he and Terry hadn't been closer; perhaps he should have invited the boy's confidences more than he had. Yet how could he? While Terry had been

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growing up, his father had been away most of the time, covering the circuit.

More than anything he had ever wanted in his life, Noonan wanted Terry to make good in this game, chiefly to impress Decato with the fact that the boy could hold his own in faster company. Boston would be a good town to break into. Boston was a red-hot baseball town and a good one so far as treatment of its players was concerned. Boston was slowly but surely making its comeback in the world of baseball; it badly needed a shortstop.

Meditatively, John Noonan watched Thompson throw in another slow curve; saw the batter pop up a fly ball to Lefty Flynn, who faded back and took it easily. Yeh, he certainly hoped the kid could land with Boston.

"Maybe he'll bust one," he thought hopefully. "That'll help with Decato."

But the kid didn't come up, that inning. Helpless before the pitching of Tommy Fitzpatrick the first three Pirate batters went out, two by the strikeout route and the third on a pop-up to third. Pitching great ball, Tommy was — marvelous ball. But maybe he'd break.

THE eighth inning, with the Bears at bat! Thompson's fast one hit the first batter on the thigh. Rubbing his hip, pretending that he was half killed, as ball players will, the man limped down to first. Then, on the next pitched ball he stole second.

Danny Logan came to the plate. A sweet hitter, Danny, and likely to break up a ball game at any time. Decato was probably watching Danny. He would like that confident step into the pitch; that powerful swing. He would compare it with Terry's hit-getting chop.

The ball came sailing in. It was close, but Danny liked 'em close. He swung with the ball, pulling it far around to right field. With the smack of wood against horsehide, Noonan was crouched in line with the right field flag. This, too, would be close. Everything about this damned game was close!

For a moment he thought it was going to strike foul. Then he saw it strike fair, barely by an inch or two. It was so close that it might have been called either way. But the head of John Noonan, who called 'em as he saw them, came up. "Fair ball!" he yelled.

Amid a rising storm of protest from the bleachers, the man on second raced around third and came home standing up. Danny, going like a racehorse, went over second and headed for third. He had to dig to make it, but make it he did. His beautiful hook slide carried him away from third-baseman Potts and into the bag, as Potts took the relayed ball and made a wild, diving stab at the runner. Another cloud of dust, with John Noonan diving into it to be on top of the play.

"Safe!" he roared, both hands spread wide, palms downward.

The storm of protest became a hurricane as the home fans gave tongue to their rage.

"What the hell ails that guy's eyes!" —"Oh, you robber! You dirty crook!"— "Sock him, Potts! Kill him!"— "BOOOOOOO!"

And Terry—Terry was encouraging it. He was throwing his glove upon the ground as if further effort were futile. Placing his arms akimbo, jutting out from his hips, he glared at his father. That was the thing that hurt —to have Terry grandstand to the fans at the expense of his father.

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"The man is safe!" repeated John Noonan steadily. "Play ball!"

THE ninth inning; the score 3-2 in favor of the Bears; and the Pirates at bat. This would be the inning with the tensity merely the fuse that awaited the spark. Thompson up—a slow roller to second. One away! Potts up—a clean, nifty single between first and second. Hard running took Potts to second base, against all mathematical probability.

Gleason, hard-hitting left-fielder up. A high fly to center that the fielder took almost without moving out of his tracks. Two away, with the stands beginning to move toward the exits. Fernald up—a walk! Maybe Tommy Fitzpatrick was cracking under the strain; maybe he was going to break. Jennings up—another walk! The bases filled, and jubilation entering the soul of John Noonan; jubilation that he fought to repress as unfair!

Terry Noonan on call — a determined, grim-jawed Terry, hurrying to the plate swinging three bats! Just before he reached the box he stopped, tossed two of the bats to the boy, knocked the dirt out of his spikes and stepped to the plate. Two away, the bases loaded, and Terry Noonan up! Noonan had known it would be like that.

In the stands the crowd had now turned from the exits and was roaring, howling, for a hit. Over and over the noise rolled from them in a great chant: "Get that hit! Get that hit! Get that hit!"

Fitzpatrick's infield was talking with him now, the whole Bears' infield pleading with him to steady down, while over in the bullpen Ed Thorpe was hastily warming up.

Fitzpatrick nodded, grinning, and the infield retired. A cool guy, Tommy. Maybe he'd stave off the break after all.

A windup, and a ball that whizzed over the inside corner! Terry cut at it viciously with that chop of his, missed.

"Strrrrrike one!"

That was not what Noonan wanted to say. He wanted to say: "Take your time, kid, take your time! He's in a tougher spot than you are.—Let him come to you!"

A hook that broke sharply too far out!

"Ball one!"

A rising roar from the stands. Another fast one over the inside corner that Terry let go past.

"Strrrrrike two!"— "And hit 'em when they're in there, kid!" he thought.

"Aw, for cripes sake watch 'em!" snarled Terry.

Two hooks in a row, both wide.

"Ball thureee!"— And to himself, "That's the old eye, kid! That's the old eye!"

The stands were in pandemonium. Three and two, and the bases loaded! A walk would tie up the game; a hit would win it. Hands tightly clenched, John Noonan crouched behind the plate. Once he ran his tongue over lips that were dry. God, he'd be glad when this was over!

He realized that he was shaking like a leaf. He fought for control of himself, gluing his eyes to the ball in Tommy's hands.

Then he saw the pitcher's gloved hand shutting and opening in a slow, clenching motion. A hook! It would be a hook! "Get set, kid, for a hook! Get set, get set!" But the kid didn't know, and John Noonan couldn't tell him.

That wind-up—it seemed minutes

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long! Wasn't Tommy ever going to throw the damned ball? Wasn't he ever—?

THE ball came in waist high, headed for the exact middle of the plate. Terry stepped into it, started to swing. Then he saw it break, and held his bat a foot from his shoulder. It broke sharply, and the keen eye of Umpire Noonan saw it cut the outside corner just as Terry, grinning joyously, threw down his bat and started for first.

In that split-second, temptation came to John Noonan. It would be easy to call that a ball. Nobody could kick on the decision. The ball had barely cut the corner. Perhaps, too, he had seen it wrong. After all, a guy can't always call 'em right; he's got to miss one once in awhile. Perhaps it really had been outside. Perhaps . . .

But one does not break the habit of years so easily, and for years, John Noonan had been calling 'em as he saw them.

His shoulders straightened, and his thumb jerked toward the Pirates' bench. "Batter's out!" he roared.

Terry whirled, his face white and unbelieving. "WHAT!"

"Batter's out!" repeated Noonan, steadily eyeing his son.

A thunderous, booing roar from the stands!

Terry approached his father, his face set in the lines of a snarl. "That's too much!" he screamed. "Damn it, that's too much!"

John Noonan set himself. The kid was wild, berserk. This would be the showdown. It might even come to blows, he realized with a sick feeling.

But as he set himself, he saw out of the corner of his eye a pop bottle come spinning through the air. It had been aimed at him, but Terry was walking right in line of it.

John Noonan acted wholly upon impulse. He lunged forward, his hands striking Terry on the chest, tumbling the boy head over heels out of the way. The bottle descended squarely upon Noonan's unprotected head, and ball players of both teams rushed to the umpire's aid as he fell, smiling and crumpled to the ground. . . .

HE opened his eyes in the hospital, the odor of ether and clean linen in his nostrils. A white-clad nurse bent over him as he tried to struggle to one elbow.

"Everything's all r i g h t, Mr. Noonan," she soothed. "Now, just lie quietly."

"It was a strike!" fumed Noonan still struggling. "So help me, it cut the corner!"

"Of course it was. Now quiet—quiet."

Under her voice he relaxed. Presently his head cleared and he saw Terry sitting by the bedside, still in uniform, his face white and worried.

"It was over the corner, kid," said Noonan.

Terry swallowed hard. "Sure, I —I know," he said. "I knew it would be, the minute it started to break. I just couldn't get my bat off my shoulder, that's all."

STRENGTH came back to John Noonan quickly. Another man came into the room, upon a nod from the nurse. Noonan blinked. It was Big Jim Caldwell, president of the National League.

Big Jim smiled down. He masked his sympathy in a bit of kidding. That was the way of ball players; and it was Big Jim's way. "Sort of used your

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head on that last play, didn't you, John?" he said.

John Noonan smiled wanly.

"Sort of," he replied.

Big Jim nodded. "It's a good thing you're tough, or they'd have had to do more than take five stitches," he said. Becoming serious he continued, "John, I saw that last strike. I was sitting right behind the plate to-day. You could easily have let the boy go down to first on it, but you didn't.—I saw other plays, too—close ones."

A moment he paused, looking into the square, wondering face of Noonan.

"There's going to be room in the National League for another umpire next season, John," he went on at last. "We won't go into details now, but when you get stronger there's a contract waiting for you."

"Gee, that's swell!" said Terry Noonan. His young, tanned face broke into a smile.

"But you, kid," said Noonan. "Did you—did Decato—?"

Still smiling, Terry shook his head.

"He took Danny Logan," he said. "He said I needed another year of seasonin'. He talked to me plenty straight, too; told me as soon as I got over playin' to the grandstand all the time I'd be a better ball player.— Oh, he told me right where I got off, all right. But I had it comin' to me. And say, it didn't do me a bit o' harm, neither."

Noonan's voice was husky. "No, that's right, kid," he said. "You did have it comin' to you.— But just the same, I kind of wish you'd gone up."

"I got plenty o' time," said Terry, cheerfully. "I'll make it all right." Almost shyly he put his hand on his father's, only to draw it quickly away again. "But I guess the best play now is for you to go up first an' show me the way!"

John Noonan turned his head quickly away. For years he'd been calling 'em as he saw them, but for some reason at the moment he couldn't see.

THE END

Crazy Courage

WHEN the Foreign Legion of France was fighting Druse tribes in Syria they ran up against a new kind of courage. At Moussifrey three thousand Druse horsemen charged a barbed-wire fortification. Hundreds died. Horses went down. Still they came, till the entanglement was full of dead bodies. Over this bridge of corpses charged the fanatic tribesmen, naked, holding their bullets in rags grasped in their teeth. Machine guns mowed them down as they cleared the barbs.

Twenty charged a tank, grasping the caterpillar tread bare-handed to stop it. Even when ten had been shot and five crushed by the tank, the remaining five kept on. Again twenty charged a machine gun nest . . . One reached the gunner and sliced his hand with a knife before he went down. Three hundred hid till they were in the midst of 12,000 advancing Frenchmen, then staged a wild attack. A cannon was quickly swung about and fired directly at them.

Such willingness to die has been explained by the Druse belief that he will return to earth in a splendid new body after fifteen years in paradise, a sort of harem.

J. W. Holden.

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STRANGER *than* FICTION

By JOHN S. STUART

STUPEFIED FISH

ON the Canary Islands grows a plant known as *Euphorbia Canariensis,* belonging to the same family as the box-tree used for hedges. The species which grows on the Canary Islands flourishes only where its roots can make contact with the basic lava of the islands. It yields a caustic milk which when used by fishermen stupefies the fish.

WHAT A WALLOP!

RECENTLY on the Boston police records appeared this unusual charge. Deocleceisiro Carneiro, a seaman, charged John Maceria, another seaman, with hitting him on the jaw with such vigor that he broke his right ankle!

DENTISTRY 1,000 YEARS AGO

THE Zapotec Indians, in Mexico, practised dentistry one thousand years ago. All the dental work was done solely for decoration, and the teeth were inlaid with hematite, gold and other precious metals. For an anaesthetic the Indians used a wild mushroom which still grows in Mexico and produces a " jag " which lasts for days.

BABY UNDER THE BED

WHEN a doctor visits the homes of certain Mexican peons he always looks for the baby under the bed. No cribs, trundles or baskets are used for the baby. It is wrapped in a strip of white cloth three or four yards long, arms pinioned to its sides, and carelessly tossed out of the way under the bed!

ANCIENT AID TO BEAUTY

HENNA, the dye that is used for woman's hair to-day, and that was employed to stain her fingernails and toes, in past ages, is an Egyptian plant. It bears small white flowers, and the leaves, when dried and crushed to dust, are made into a paste which is used as a dye.

WOMAN'S WITCHING WAYS

AN act passed by Parliament in the Seventeenth Century, provided that—" any woman, whatever age, rank, profession or degree, whether maids or widows, which from and after such an act, impose upon, seduce, and betray into matrimony any of his Majesty's subjects by use of cosmetics, washes, artificial teeth, false hair, Spanish wool, iron stays, hoops, bolstered hips, shall incur the penalty of the law in force against witchcraft and like misdemeanors and the marriage upon conviction shall stand *null* and *void.*"

WHITE DUCK—BLACK EGG

MRS. F. COX of East Hagbourne, Berkshire, England, claims she owns a remarkable duck. The duck is white, and has astonished the neighbors by laying a perfectly black egg.

HOOK-MONEY

IN Ceylon, during the seventeenth century, the currency was something you could hang onto. It was not in the form of coins, as we know them to-day, but was chunks of actual silver, each chunk with a hook. It was known as " hook-money."

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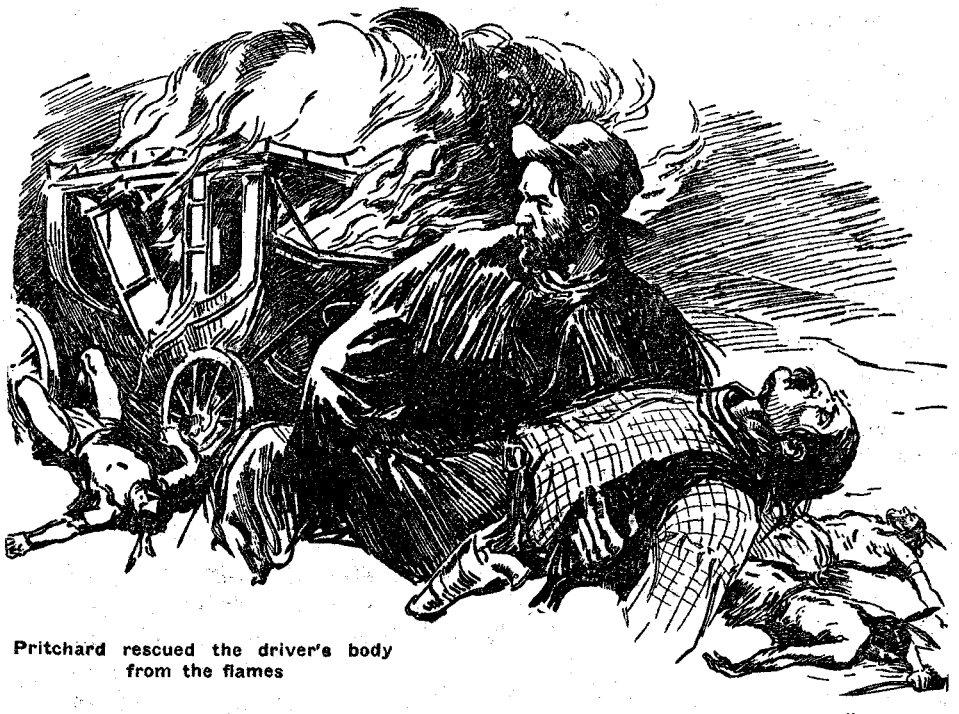

Pritchard rescued the driver's body from the flames

West of Apache Pass*

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "Breath of the Desert," "Clear the Trail," etc.

Tennessee Bob, stage coach guard, knew that Apaches were not his only enemies infesting the Arizona desert

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ANNE PRITCHARD'S rancher father was too busy to travel from Tucson to El Paso when his sister sent word that she was seriously ill. In his stead he sent his daughter, doubling the guard that rode with the coaches of the new Arizona stage line because there was great danger from Apache Indians, as well as from the roving bands of outlaws. Anne was especially thrilled when she learned that the chief of the stage guards was Tennessee Bob Randall, whose duties, she knew, also included that of serving as judge for the criminal trials conducted by Tucson's new Vigilante Committee.

The Apaches were the more threatening of late because their chief, Cochise, had been betrayed by Lieutenant Cabot of the U. S. Cavalry. Cabot had also betrayed Tennessee Bob, because he had used the stage guard's friendship with Cochise as a means of luring the old Apache chief into camp. Cochise had managed to escape with his life, but two of his chiefs Lieutenant Cabot hanged.

One of the several bands of white outlaws was known as the Smoothfaces, because most of its members were irresponsible, beardless youths like the Pichacho Kid. But the Smoothfaces confined their activities to raids upon the numerous bands of Mexican bandits, who in turn preyed

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upon the wagon trains of white Americans. Blakeslee, leader of the Smoothfaces, was infatuated with Anne Pritchard, and was so jealous of the favor which Tennessee Bob found in her eyes that he had once sworn to kill the stage guard. Yet when an opportunity to do so presented itself, he could not because he was under obligation to Tennessee for having saved him from the Apaches.

Another notorious outlaw was Luke Malpass, who headed a gang of cutthroats. Malpass, like Blakeslee, had seen Anne Pritchard and had sworn to have her. He had even made one unsuccessful attempt to abduct her, and she had declared that if she ever got the chance she would shoot him.

The Indian situation was so serious when Anne started home from El Paso, that Dean Pritchard, Blakeslee and Tennessee Bob started out together to accompany her stage coach back to Tucson.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RETURN JOURNEY.

MORALITY had relaxed her vigilance; she had fallen asleep and her head had dropped to her husband's shoulder. He, too, had succumbed to weariness, and his chin was on his chest. Perhaps it was a relief to him to carry merely the physical burden that now rested upon him.

Anne also was asleep. The stage had been traveling over a level stretch of sand. There had been some swaying, and almost no jolting, and the passengers had succumbed to the lulling motion. Suddenly the stage jolted to a stop. Anne awoke in pitch blackness, to hear Morality pouring out her exasperation into the patient ears of her spouse.

"Henry, I vowed I'd never make this trip! I knew it would be a trial—and it certainly is. Where are we?"

"I don't know, Maizie. I can't see no better than you can. I cal'late we're in New Mexico, by this time."

"What an awful place!" Morality groaned. "I'm thirsty."

A voice—the driver's, Anne discovered—addressed them from the outside darkness.

"Thar's a eatin' house right ahead, folks," it said. "This is a stage station. While we're changin' hosses, you folks kin git out and go to the eatin' house and git yourselves somethin' to eat and drink. You kin stay thar until the stage picks you up."

Anne was not hungry, but the day had been dry and hot, and she eagerly welcomed this opportunity to quench her thirst. She was out of the stage door, preceding Patience and Morality by some seconds. A little stiff from the ride, she walked ahead, through the darkness, toward a light that flickered through a window.

The only liquids at the eating house proved to be water, which Anne knew would be strongly tainted with alkali, and black coffee, with the inevitable chicory flavor. However, she preferred the coffee to the water, and so she sat at the greasy little counter, drinking, when Morality and Patience entered. She did not look up.

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed Morality. "Is this a restaurant? Do you think I'd eat in a place like this, Henry?"

A lanky, saturnine-eyed man with a large, drooping mustache stood behind the little counter, solemnly and speculatively gazing at the intruders.

"Don't worry none about that, ma'am," he said. "We're plumb out of grub. We had some frog's laigs and some patty-de-foy-grass, about an hour ago, but a bullwhacker with a appetite come in and gobbled it all up. I'm sorry I can't accommodate you."

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The lady was finally induced by her husband to drink some tepid water from a tin cup. She took only a sip and then retreated, grimacing, followed by her patient consort.

"She in the stage with you, ma'am?" asked the eating house man after the two had departed.

Anne nodded. "They've occupied the stage with me," she said, smiling.

"I reckon I see!" drawled the man. "You ain't got what you might call acquainted with them yet—especially *her.*" He eyed Anne appraisingly. "I reckon *you'll* never git acquainted with her. Beats all what fools they is in the world, don't it, ma'am?—Take her"—he jerked a thumb toward the outside darkness—"give her time and she'll be tellin' Saint Peter his business.—Matrimony's a risk, ma'am. A sort of lottery. Look what thet pore male critter drawed!—You're Anne Pritchard, ain't you? Wal, I heerd you'd be comin' through on this stage, and I had my wife fix up somethin' for you to eat."

He began to produce food—sandwiches, beans, pie.

"You kin trust this hyar," he smiled. "My wife cooked it."

Anne ate, and the eating house man was immensely pleased.

"No good spoilin' thet kind of grub on her!" he said.

ANNE finished, thanked the man, and went to the doorway. Morality and Patience were standing outside in the darkness. Obviously they had seen the food, and Morality made noises indicating her displeasure.

"Henry, that man insulted me!" she declared. "He lied. He had plenty of food all the time.—If you don't go in there and tell him what you think of him you are no husband of mine!"

Perhaps a tragedy was averted by the timely arrival of the stage coach from the station. In the light from the restaurant window Anne caught a glimpse of Henry's face, and thought she saw an expression of intense relief upon it.

In the pitch blackness that surrounded the stage Anne almost had to feel for the door of the vehicle; and when she got in she sank back into the cushions of her corner, to listen for an interminable time to the lamentations of Morality.

Presently Anne went to sleep again, to awaken several times. The lamentations finally ceased. The air grew chill, and Anne drew a robe over her.

By noon of the next day Morality was now in a state of collapse. Her clothing was disarranged, her hat was rakishly tilted over an ear and an eye, giving her a ludicrous appearance—she who had been so prim and staid at the beginning of the trip.

They traveled at a slower pace now, for the trend of the land was upward. The grass on the sloping hillsides and the ridges grew more sparse. Yet despite the heat and the monotony, Anne enjoyed the panorama visible through the open windows; she even thrilled to the wild, long dashes down the slopes, when the horses were running hard and the driver profanely urged them on. Several times, rounding sharp curves, the coach seemed ready to topple over, and Morality awakened to scream aloud that they would all be killed.

But the dusk came and they were still alive, and the stage was still rolling steadily onward. Again the pitch blackness of a desert night. Several stops at stations, where lanterns bobbed, revealing the heavy boots of the men who carried them, and bring-

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ing into Anne's vision dimly illuminated faces of rough, bronzed men and the shadowy figures of horses.

Then pitch blackness again, and the virgin wilderness. The steady beating of horses' hoofs, the crunching of wheels, the incessant rolling and pitching and swaying. And again sleep.

With the dawn they reached Deming, and the stage swept rapidly over the giant undulations of the land surrounding the town, and finally came to a halt, the brakes screaming.

Anne got out of the coach. She was rather stiff from her cramped position during the night, and she was pleased when the driver told her that they would be in Deming for upward of an hour. She turned, after speaking to the driver—and saw Tennessee, standing alone, within half a dozen feet of her, smiling at her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "*It's you!*"

"It's me, Anne," he answered, quietly.

Morality and Patience had also descended, and the lady was horrified to see the "flirt" of El Paso rushing brazenly into the arms of a tall young giant arrayed in a gray flannel shirt, buckskin trousers, spurred boots and a wide-brimmed felt hat, whose face wore the dusky bloom of health and embarrassment.

Patience saw also, and he whispered admiringly, "Gawsh, Maizie! Ain't he a fine-lookin' fellow?"

Anne and Tennessee were not even aware of the scandalized woman.

"I've engaged a room in the hotel for you, Anne," said Tennessee, after he had kissed her. "You can run up and get slicked up a bit, and then we'll eat."

Anne's hands were gripping his shoulders as she looked up at him. "You're going to ride back with me?"

His eyes glowed with happiness; and Morality did not hear his answer.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ATTACKED IN THE PASS.

TRAVELING many hours behind Tennessee, the Smoothfaces and the Pritchard outfit rode into Sulphur Springs Valley on the morning of the third day after leaving Tucson. They could not travel as fast as Tennessee had, for Tennessee had exchanged horses at every stage station along the trail.

He had slept little, and although Pritchard and Blakeslee had wasted but little time at their camps, their progress was not as rapid as it might have been. Yet Pritchard was in no great hurry. He knew that Anne would have the guard he had sent with her, and that the Smoothfaces and his own men would reach the San Simon in time to escort Anne's stage through the pass.

When they reached Fort Bowie about dusk on the day that Pritchard had planned, Lieutenant Cabot told them if the west stage was on time—and it usually was, he declared—it would come through the pass during the late hours of the night.

"It's slow work through there," he added. "It's usually about four o'clock in the morning when the stage pulls into the station here. Sometimes it arrives earlier."

"Any Apaches around?" asked Pritchard.

"Country's quiet," declared Cabot. "I haven't seen an Indian around for a week."

"Seen the ghosts of White Eagle and Sittin' Bear?" asked Pritchard.

Lieutenant Cabot laughed. "I haven't even looked for them," he said.

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Pritchard grunted. "When you've fit Indians—especially Apaches—as long as I have fit 'em, Cabot, you'll know better than to play a dog's trick on 'em."

"I don't like them, and I'll kill the damned scoundrels whenever I get a chance!" declared Cabot.

"Hmmm!" grumbled Pritchard. He stared hard at the lieutenant. "Cabot," he said, "thar's Apaches around the pass. We saw tracks out a ways—plenty of them. Cochise got shot in one of his laigs, I heerd. He's had time to git over it. Mebbe he's sittin' in his tepee in his village, thinkin' about how nice you treated him, and how you helped his relatives, Sittin' Bear and White Eagle, to get to the happy huntin' ground. But if you think that, you don't know the Apache nature. If I was you, I'd keep my eyes open and my powder dry."

"I can take care of myself, Pritchard."

"Mebbe so. Far as you go, that's all right. But thar's other people in this kentry, Cabot. Thar's freighters comin' through every few days; thar's the stages comin' through twice a week, both ways; and thar's emigrant trains oncet in a while."

"I know my business, Pritchard."

Pritchard did not answer. He stalked out of the gateway of the stockade, Blakeslee following. They had gone only a few steps when Cabot called to them:

"I'm sending a detail through the pass before midnight. I don't think it's necessary, for you must have thirty or forty men of your own here, and you could lick a thousand Apaches. I understand your daughter is coming through to-night. She's a fine girl, Pritchard, and I don't blame you for being concerned over her safety."

Again Pritchard failed to answer. He and Blakeslee went back to the stage station, where they ate supper. It was about midnight when they mounted and rode down into the pass, to melt into the inky blackness of the first cañon.

Pritchard had been through the pass several times, during the days when he had first come to Arizona, but knowledge of the devious turns and twists of the trail through it was useless, for the human vision could not penetrate a foot ahead. Pritchard, leading, was first to trust to the instinct of the horse under him. The animal refused to advance faster than a walk. The entire company rode in single file, the Opatas and the Papagos staying close to Pritchard, the Smoothfaces following. The hoofs of the horses clattered loudly upon the rocky floor of the first shallow cañon, the sound reverberating hollowly.

There was no talk. These riders, wild, primitive, inured to danger, contemptuous of the visible and recognizable hazards of their daily life, were impressed by the heavy, foreboding, sinister silence into which they were riding. Some of them had never been through the pass, yet all knew of its evil reputation.

THEY were a long time getting through the first cañon. After a while they knew that they were ascending, for each rider's body was forced back against the cantle of his saddle, and each rider's knees could feel the muscles of the forelegs of the horse under him swelling with additional effort. For a time the blackness that enveloped them was impenetrable. They were riding in a silent void, not knowing what was ahead of them.

They rode on steadily, alert. They

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watched, even though they could see nothing but the sky and stars. Around bends which they could not see, down slopes, judging distance by the length of time the weight of their bodies rested against the pommels of their saddles.

They had been riding for half an hour, perhaps, when they observed that the expanse of blue above them had widened to an immense distance. The darkness had increased, but the sky had grown bluer and the stars glowed more brilliantly. A golden haze seemed to envelope them. To their left they could now distinguish the tall peak of Mount Graham, silhouetted against the star haze.

Pritchard halted. He knew that they had ridden into a section of the pass where the mountain slopes flattened. They were on a level in a timbered valley, for the scent of spruce was strong in the clear night air. The riders congregated around Pritchard. The trail was wide here. There was now no sound at all except the creaking of saddle leather and the occasional stomping of an impatient hoof.

"Somethin' up, Pritchard?" asked Blakeslee in a tense whisper.

"Plenty!" answered Pritchard. "Listen!"

An owl hooted. The riders all knew that there were owls in this country. Yet although the sound closely resembled the hooting of the nocturnal bird, the riders who sat there listening were able to detect a human note in the sound.

"Hell!" exclaimed Blakeslee. He became silent, then.

The hoot they had heard seemed to have come from a point on the back trail. Now there came another hoot, from a point ahead of them. They listened attentively, and far away to the north, seemingly from a distant mountain slope, came a third mournful hoot.

AFTER a fourth hoot had echoed and reëchoed in the vast, aching stillness, Pritchard cursed.

"Hell and blazes! If I had Cabot hyar I'd wring his damned neck. No Indians! The pass is alive with 'em!"

"You're right, Pritchard; the hosses smell 'em. They want to get out of here, and damn me if I blame 'em!"

"Shucks, Blakeslee, you know well enough that the devils won't do any fightin' when it's this dark. They're just figurin' to tell each other thet they know some riders are in the pass. It's likely they're after thet fool Cabot.—Wal," he added, "we'll keep on goin'. If they're after Cabot, we'll let Cabot take care of himself. We're goin' to meet the stage, in spite of all the damned Apaches this side of hell!"

Apaches were in the pass. The question was, why were they here? Had they watched a wagon train, westbound across the San Simon, and had they planned to ambush the train here with the coming of the dawn? Or had they planned to intercept the stage? Pritchard knew of the presence of no wagon train near the pass, but perhaps the Apaches did. He was certain, though, that the stage would be along soon. He felt certain that they would not attack a wagon train in the dark, if the train were properly parked and defended. The Apaches would know. They might, however, attack the stage. An obstruction in the trail would bring disaster, confusion, massacre. Faggots, hastily lighted after the first onslaught, would disclose the unfortunate survivors.

Pritchard rode on, more alert than ever. But once more, where the blue sky again expanded, he halted, and as

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before, the others congregated close to him.

"Well?" sharply questioned Blakeslee.

"Thar's more ahead than behind," answered Pritchard. "Thar's two parties."

"How do you know that, Pritchard?"

"I smell 'em, and my hoss smells 'em. I been havin' a hell of a time gittin' him to move forward. He wants to go back."

THERE was a silence, which Pritchard broke.

"Now why are they split up like thet?" he asked. "Blakeslee, it looks to me as if they're figurin' on keepin' Cabot's men away from somethin' they're aimin' to do at this end."

"If that's so, how did they come to let us get through?"

"Mebbe 'cause we came early they thought we was just a party ridin' through, and would git out of the way before they got to doin' what they aim to do."

"They're goin' to raid the stage," declared Blakeslee. "Damn their hides, let's get goin' and meet it!"

"Wait!" warned Pritchard. "Hear thet shot back thar toward the fort?—And look thar!"

Far back in the pass appeared a dull glow which danced, flickeringly, upon the face of a rock wall. The riders watched. The light grew brighter. Faint detonations reached the ears of the listeners.

"Thet's Cabot's detail," grimly declared Pritchard.

"That's a new one," said Blakeslee, astonishment and excitement in his voice. "They've lit a fire so's they can pick off Cabot and his men. You was right, Pritchard. There's two parties of 'em. Cabot's men are sure fightin' though. And that shootin' will bring more soldiers from the fort."

"Wal, I hate to do this, boys, but I reckon we'll hev to go back and give the soldiers a lift," said Pritchard.

Pritchard was wheeling his horse when Blakeslee's voice halted the movement. "Wait," he said hoarsely. "What's that ahead?"

Pritchard jerked his horse around and faced east. Far down the pass was another glow in the sky, larger than the one in the west. The sky was streaked with a crimson light which seemed to come from the bottom of the pass. Pritchard roared:

"The stage! Hell and blazes! They'll git Anne!"

Pritchard drove the spurs deep into the flanks of his horse, and the animal plunged forward with the swiftness of a thunderbolt, screaming and snorting with pain and fury.

The distant firelight did not penetrate to where Pritchard and the other riders had halted, and when they rushed forward, following Pritchard, the trail was still engulfed in darkness. Yet in an instant they were plunging after Pritchard with their horses in a dead run.

Above the wild rataplan of hoofbeats upon the hard rock trail as the Pritchard riders raced eastward rose the shrill war cry of Apaches and the heavy booming of six-shooters. The sounds mingled, multiplying, rocking from wall to wall, reverberating, thundering, growing in volume.

Pritchard and his men had been more than a mile away when they began their mad race through the pass, and for more than half of this distance they had been able to see only the glow of the fire. Now, rounding a jutting corner of a towering rock wall in the bot-

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tom of the pass, they saw that the trail ran straight between the sloping sides of two mountains. There they saw the stage.

The vehicle was standing on the trail, and it was in flames. The horses were gone. Light came from a gigantic fire which had been built in a narrow section of the trail between two low rock walls, one on either side.

In the glow perhaps a hundred Apaches were leaping in a frenzy of excitement and exultation, the fire-light behind them casting huge, grotesque shadows upon the mountain walls surrounding them.

They had killed the members of the guard and scalped them. The victims lay in a huddled heap in front of the stage, between the chaparral fire and the blazing vehicle. The driver was still on the box. Half a dozen arrows were sticking into him. His body had slumped sideways. His head was hanging limply over the edge of the seat, and his body was oddly twisted, one leg being drawn up as though to escape the flames that were licking around it.

A man and a woman, evidently passengers, were lying upon the rocky trail beside the doorway of the flaming stage coach. Arrows were also sticking in them—in the man's throat and chest and in the woman's heart. Death, for them, had been swift and merciful.

This scent confronted Pritchard as, in a frenzy of rage, he urged his horse at a terrific pace straight toward the band of Apaches. Close behind him, almost at the heels of his horse, came Blakeslee and the others, massed, their eyes wild with rage and fighting lust, their six-shooters already blazing.

The savages evidently had not heard the warning owl hoots, and they were not aware of the presence of the avenging horde until the horses reared above them.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CARNIVAL OF SLAUGHTER.

THE terrific speed of Pritchard's horse carried the huge, broad-shouldered man almost through the ring of warriors. Three or four of the savages, seeing too late the dual thunderbolt of horse and rider that shot at them from the darkness beyond the fire, were hurled with terrific force down a rock declivity, maimed and crushed.

Pritchard was a raging madman. The thought that the Apaches had killed or captured Anne had aroused him to an insensate fury. Through the ring of warriors the horse slid, his forelegs braced. Before he halted, Pritchard was out of the saddle, striking, slaying. A twelve-inch knife which he carried in a sheath in his right boot top was flashing wickedly in the fire-light.

The deadly Opatas, swift and decisive in their movements, were among the Apaches almost as soon as Pritchard. The Papagos, short, dark, lithe, had closed in; and Blakeslee, leading his ferocious Smoothfaces, was fighting with the wild abandon which had made him and his men famous.

Dozens of Apaches, hideous in their war paint, were now lying upon the level near the stage coach. The flames of the doomed vehicle, lighted with venomous purpose, had supplied light for their destruction. The nearby slopes of the pass, the shallow ravines that intersected it, the gorges, the ridges and the wooded sections which in the darkness would have afforded concealment, were now illuminated.

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The battle ground expanded; sounds of the conflict receded. From distant points in the pass came crimson, lance-like flashes—the Smoothfaces using their six-shooters. A scream of mortal agony told when a long knife went home.

The leaping, flickering flames from chaparral fire and stage coach revealed Pritchard, an awesome and gigantic figure as he leaped here and there among the dead and wounded upon the level, and the nearer slopes, seeking Anne. Once, not finding her, he stood with his face upturned, searching a southern slope; and the firelight glowing upon his wild eyes disclosed that they were agonized with a conviction that Anne had been carried away.

He leaped for the box of the stage and dragged the driver's body down. The flames were licking it. He carried the body to the edge of the level surmounting the slope, and then stood with feet spread wide apart, his shoulders drooping, as if carrying a heavy weight on them. Standing there, he heard hoofs thundering upon the west trail. He stared, and saw Cabot's cavalrymen coming up the pass toward him, their blue uniforms visible in the firelight, their scabbards clanking.

HE ran to meet them, and Cabot, riding ahead, brought his horse to a sudden stop and stared, amazed and awed by Pritchard's appearance. Pritchard's long knife was gripped tightly in his right hand. The blade was dripping red; the hand, the arm, the right shoulder were stained brightly. He was a ghastly spectacle.

His eyes awed Cabot. In the firelight they seemed to blaze. He spoke and his voice was husky with passion. "They've got Anne, Cabot! They've got Anne!—Damn them to Hell!"

"Killed her, you mean?"

"Drug her off. She's gone. They've got her!"

He stood before the cavalry, legs braced, his huge shoulders drooping, the long knife gleaming red.

"Damn you, Cabot! You're responsible for this! You and your damned dog's trick!—Talk! If you know any place or any trail out of this pass where they could have taken Anne, tell me quick or I'll cut your damned heart out!"

Cabot paled; his horse backed. "I know," he said hoarsely. He snapped a short order to his cavalrymen and the entire column wheeled and went crashing down the slope into the lower recesses of the pass.

Knife still in hand, Pritchard stood staring after them. The level and the slope that ran downward were littered with dead Apaches. There was no living thing around him. Down there in the depths of the pass, over on the slopes of the mountains northward; east in a ravine; west in a gorge and south in a shallow arroyo, he could see an occasional flash of crimson fire, lance-like, splitting the darkness. He could hear the booming of six-shooters, an occasional shriek. Too late now for him to go down there.

He turned and strode grimly among the dead, peering at every face. He went to the man and woman lying on the level ground near the stage door and knelt beside them to study their faces in the now dying firelight. Strangers, of course.

He examined the driver's body. Williams. He stood erect again and stared at the empty traces. He saw the harness, four sets, lying nearby, and so he knew that the Apaches had driven the horses off. The devils were always after horses. The thought steadied him

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somewhat, calmed him, permitted his brain to function again.

Being certain that there would be no interruption to their wild carnival of slaughter, the Apaches had first killed the driver and the guard, then the passengers. Then they had deliberately unhitched the horses and led them down into the pass. Perhaps Anne had been placed upon one of the horses. The Apaches knew the country in the vicinity of the pass; they knew every inch of the pass itself. No doubt some of the cañons that intersected the pass led to a secret outlet. He could find no place like that in the dark. But tomorrow, as soon as the first light of dawn appeared, he'd trail the horses.

HIS own horse stood at a little distance from him on a slope, away from the scene of the fight. He saw the reins trailing over the animal's head, but he did not remember having placed them there. He remembered nothing but the fact that he had wrought fearful execution with the long knife that he still gripped in his right hand.

He strode back to the stage coach and stared at it again. Too late. His fault. He could have been hours earlier —days even. He should have been. His wild rage, having no enemy upon which to express itself, began to subside. A calmness came upon him, and with it came reason.

Only some charred and blazing embers of the coach still remained. The flames had died almost completely, except for some little remnants of fire that still ate at fragments of the frame of the vehicle. The chaparral fire had also died down. The outer darkness of the great pass, forced back by the light of the flames, was creeping in again.

He turned and gazed out into the pass. He knew that Blakeslee and his Smoothfaces, and his own Opatas and Papagos, would not return until there was no longer any hope of their finding a single Apache. His thoughts went to the bodies of the guard, and he started so violently that the long knife almost dropped from his hand.

Reason had returned. He had gazed into their faces. This was the regular guard. Not the guard he had sent. His special guard, his Opatas, would stay with Anne. They'd never leave her, no matter how long she stayed in El Paso. He had given them orders to stay with her. They weren't here and he knew that they would never permit themselves to be captured. Therefore, since they were not here, Anne could not have been on this stage. Yet in that case, failing to take the stage she had designated, she would have written, and if she had written, where would the letter be? In the driver's pocket.

He ran to the body of the driver, searched his pockets and finally drew out several letters. Kneeling on the bloody ground, he lit a slow-burning sulphur match and read the addresses on the envelopes, almost shouting with joy when he discovered one bearing his name and an El Paso postmark. There, impatiently, lighting one match after another, and peering intently at the writing, his mighty chest heaving with ecstasy, he read that Anne had delayed her departure until the twenty-fourth.

He folded the letter, placed it back in the envelope, and got to his feet to stare gratefully upward into the starry blue of the sky. His fierce exultation was tempered by the tragedy that had overtaken the man and the woman who had been passengers on the stage.—But they were strangers, and they had already been avenged.

He climbed into the saddle and rode

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down the slope into the darkness of the pass.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A WOUNDED ORPHAN.

AT dawn, having traveled several miles searching for Apaches, finding two and using the long knife upon them, Pritchard heard a clanking in an arroyo below him, and saw Lieutenant Cabot and some of his cavalrymen riding toward him. He sat silent, looking at them. He rode down a slope and met Lieutenant Cabot at the head of the arroyo. Cabot sat stiffly in the saddle. His eyes were red-rimmed and he was saddle weary, but there was a singularly mixture of resentment and dignity in his manner. He merely nodded to Pritchard.

"Find any trace of the horses?" asked Pritchard.

"No, sir."

Pritchard grinned. "I reckon I was a little excited last night, Cabot," he said. "You see, I thought Anne was on that stage. But she wasn't."

Cabot's face paled, then reddened. "You owe me an apology, sir," he said frigidly.

"I'm apologizin'."

That would be the end of it, as far as Pritchard was concerned. He rode down into the pass again and among the rocky bottom to a gorge that led him by easy stages up a slope to the trail, and thence to the débris of the stage coach, where he halted his horse and scanned the pass for sight of Blakeslee and his Smoothfaces and his own Indians.

Lieutenant Cabot and his cavalrymen clattered up. At Cabot's orders, the men dismounted. Some of them dropped to the grassy slopes to rest; others, curious, strode among the dead savages, peering and talking. Cabot sat stiffly in the saddle, staring belligerently at Pritchard. Finally he blurted:

"Good heavens, man, you certainly did fearful work with that long knife!" He gazed around, grimly. "You didn't lose a man!"

"I noticed that. My men, and the Smoothfaces, are fighters."

"That's quite right," agreed Cabot. "It will take half a day to clean up this mess." He ordered two troopers to return to the fort to bring picks and shovels, and after they had mounted and ridden away he got off his horse and stared at the bodies of the passengers. "Poor devils, they hardly knew what hit them."

He was about to speak further when one of the cavalrymen, moving among the rocks at a little distance eastward on the trail, shouted loudly:

"There's a white woman here, sir! She's alive!"

Pritchard, Lieutenant Cabot, all the cavalrymen, and some of Blakeslee's riders who were now coming up the slope, raced to where the soldier stood. There, lying face down in a grassy gully behind a huge rock flanked by some smaller rocks was another victim of the Apache attack.

She was stretched out as if asleep; and she wasn't a woman but a girl. She had evidently worn no hat, for the brown curls on her head were unadorned except for a red ribbon which was tied in a bow at the nape of her neck, confining the curls. Her head was turned sideways, disclosing the profile of a child of perhaps ten or twelve years of age, with a fair, satiny smooth skin, and long lashes that rested so lightly upon her cheeks that it seemed her eyes were about to open. There was a gash on her forehead, and

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a splotch of blood near it indicated that she had been struck or had fallen against one of the rocks.

IT was Pritchard who lifted her and carried her to a plot of grass, where he laid her tenderly upon a blanket that a cavalryman spread out for her.

"Their daughter, I reckon," said Pritchard. He examined the wound on her head.

"She fell or jumped out of the coach before it was stopped," he muttered. "It don't seem that she's hurt bad, and she ain't bled a heap."

"Her skull's cracked, mebbe," suggested a cavalryman.

Lieutenant Cabot got a canteen from one of his men, and kneeled on the blanket beside the girl. The dried blood was washed away, the wound examined and bathed, and a few drops of the water forced between the child's lips.

"She's powerful pale," declared Pritchard. "I reckon we'd better git her to the fort and let the surgeon look her over."

Pritchard mounted his horse and two of the cavalrymen lifted the girl and carried her over to him, placing her in his waiting arms.

He saw some of his Opatas standing near, watching him, and spoke to them. "Anne wasn't on thet stage. She ain't leavin' El Paso until the twenty-fourth. Williams was carryin' a letter from her to me, tellin' me thet. I'm takin' this gal to the fort. You wait hyar until I git back, and hold the other boys hyar. Tell Blakeslee and his Smoothfaces to wait, too. We're ridin' through to meet the stage thet Anne's in."

He rode west, down the trail, and Cabot, his soldiers, and the Opatas, stood for some time, staring after him.

"There goes the toughest man in Arizona!" declared Cabot.

"And the fightin'est," admiringly added a soldier. "When we got here, last night, there was so many dead Apaches that you couldn't keep from steppin' on 'em. And most of 'em was all cut to pieces by that long knife of Pritchard's."

The soldiers built a small fire on a level beside the trail and sat around it, munching rations from their meager supply. Lieutenant Cabot participated He sat on a rock, apart from the men, his hat off, scanning the distant slopes and valleys with his field glasses.

He could see the men making their way through forest and undergrowth. Blakeslee's men and Pritchard's, returning. They were widely scattered. Far and near, as he swept the slopes around him with the glasses, Cabot could see bodies of Indians. He sat amazed, as one after another of the Smoothfaces and Pritchard's Indians strode in to join the soldiers around the fire. They had pursued the Apaches on foot, and all except four, who rode the stage horses, were returning that way.

BLAKESLEE was among the last to come in, and Cabot questioned him about the losses.

"Some of the boys got cut up some," Blakeslee answered. "But they're all able to use their legs."

"A lot of the Apaches are not using their legs."

"You're right," said the leader of the Smoothfaces, grimly. "And if there had been more light, we'd have wiped them out clean." He stared at Cabot, and Cabot perceived that his face was white as chalk and that his eyes were wide, staring pools of inquiry. "Where's Pritchard?" said Blakeslee huskily.

"Gone to the fort. You wounded, Blakeslee? You look bushed."

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Blakeslee's chin went to his chest. He stood there, dejectedly staring at the ground. "I reckon Pritchard's feelin' broke up," he said.

The man was so tired with the night's work that he staggered and swayed. He walked to his horse and climbed wearily into the saddle calling his men.

"We'll get her, boys—if we have to chase Cochise to hell!"

"If you mean Anne Pritchard, I'm telling you that she wasn't on the stage!" barked Cabot.

"What!" yelled Blakeslee.

"Pritchard found a letter from her on Williams, the driver," shouted Cabot, for he got the impression that Blakeslee had not heard him. "She didn't leave El Paso until the twenty-fourth."

The lieutenant stared, amazed, for in three bounds Blakeslee was off his horse and standing in front of Cabot. He was a wild man. "Say that again, Cabot!"

Cabot repeated his words. Blakeslee sat down on a rock nearby and covered his face with his hands. He breathed deeply, like a man exhausted after a hard run. As he sat there, Cabot told him about finding the white girl.

Later, Blakeslee got up and walked to a grassy slope, where he stretched himself out flat on his back between two dead Apaches and seemed to go to sleep.

AN hour or so afterward, the ambulance wagon arrived, with the surgeon riding behind it. The ambulance contained picks and shovels. These were tossed out, and the cavalrymen divested themselves of their blue coats and set to work digging a long, shallow trench on a hillside.

"Two members of A Troop were bunged up pretty well," reported the surgeon. "They'll get along. Any casualties here?"

"Two or three of the Smoothfaces."

"I'll look them over."

"How's the girl?"

"A slight concussion, probably," returned the surgeon. "Not much I can do, there. She'll get over it, though—not serious. Rest and quiet for a couple of days.—Pretty little thing. Who is she?"

Cabot pointed, and the surgeon's face whitened. "The damned scoundrels!" he cried.

The sun climbed; the pass grew hot. The surgeon worked with the wounded white men; the dead bodies were carried down the slope. The remnants of the stage coach were gathered up and deposited in a gully; the trail was cleared of the débris of the chaparral fire.

Then the surgeon departed, telling Cabot that he would return to care for his patient at the fort. Cabot and Blakeslee sat close together, at a little distance from soldiers and Smoothfaces, Opatas and Papagos, who were lounging in groups on a grassy slope.

Blakeslee pointed to the spot where the tragedy had occurred. "New trick," he said, "buildin' a fire on the trail that way. Gives the devils a light to work by. The stage guard didn't have a chance. They couldn't see, and the Apaches could."

"They tried that on us, at the other end of the pass," said Cabot. "After you boys left, I got to thinking that sometimes Williams whooped her up coming through the San Simon and that he might reach the pass ahead of time. I don't know how you men happened to get through. The Apaches must have been puzzled about you, or they would have jumped you. Anyway

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It was us they were after, for they lit their damned fire when they heard us. The trouble was, we saw them lighting it, and blazed into them.—There wasn't much to it.

"It was a small party. They aimed to hold us up while the main band raided the stage."

When the twin peaks of Mount Graham caught the blaze of the noon sun, Pritchard came riding through the pass toward them.

"Seems he was mighty interested in that girl you was tellin' me about," said Blakeslee. "Too bad about her. But it was good she didn't see what happened."

Lieutenant Cabot rose, stretched himself, issued an order. The cavalrymen mounted their horses; the ambulance received its load of picks and shovels, as well as two of Blakeslee's men, badly cut, who had been ordered by the surgeon to return to the fort for treatment. Their horses were led away by the cavalrymen, and the entire troop, headed by Cabot, clanked and clattered westward through the pass toward the fort.

Pritchard arrived and sat on his horse mid the Smoothfaces and his Indians. "I ain't takin' no more chances!" he declared. "Anne will shore be on the next stage, and we're goin' to meet it."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A RENEGADE WHITE MAN.

As if to add to Morality's discomfort and irritation, the stage, leaving Deming, carried an extra passenger. To Morality's visible indignation, the extra passenger sat in the rear seat beside Anne Pritchard. He was the handsome young giant who had been pointed out to Morality at Deming; but the good lady had her prejudices, which had ben aroused over the spectacle of the handsome young giant rapturously kissing the "flirt."

If Morality had been truthful to herself she would have admitted that the young man, after entering the stage, conducted himself in a very gentlemanly manner. For one thing, he attended strictly to his own business, which Morality did not, for sleep no longer wooed her and she watched Anne to the exclusion of a panoramic view of a wild, beautiful and virgin country which was visible through the windows of the stage.

Near Lordsburg the grades grew stiffer. Up, up, up, the land trended. Mountains threatened to topple over upon the coach. The sky was filled with a white-hot glare. Mesas, isolated and desolated by silence space and sand, appeared and vanished. The sun went down, the afterglow spread its magic colors over the lonely land. Twilight came, then darkness and the lights of Lordsburg.

A nine o'clock, supper in a restaurant built of adobe bricks. The inevitable chicory coffee. Slabs of salt pork, soda biscuits. And to-night, beans, which Morality refused to eat. If the good lady envied the healthy appetites of Anne Pritchard and Tennessee, she gave no sign, for she stared away from them.

The silence was broken by a rumble of distant hoofbeats which grew in volume until in a ballooning dust cloud a group of horsemen thundered into town from the west. In an instant the stage was surrounded by cavorting horses and wild-looking riders—thirty or forty of them. They swarmed around the stage and into the corral of

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the stage station; they galloped close to the buildings, peering in at the lights. Morality quavered and clung to her white-faced consort, who was also frightened.

"Mercy!" gasped the lady. "We'll be killed! They are outlaws!"

"Shush, Maizie!" cautioned the man. "They might hear you. They certainly are a villainous looking lot. Keep still and maybe they won't notice us."

AS it happened, they weren't noticed, then. For the horsemen had congregated in front of the restaurant. They had all dismounted and were staring in. And to Morality's amazement they were grinning. After a moment, there was a commotion on the outer edge of the group of the men, and a black-bearded, broad-shouldered rider pressed forward to the door of the restaurant. He threw the door wide, and stood in the opening, grinning.

"Father!" cried Anne Pritchard.

"Anne!" bellowed Pritchard.

"Well, of all things!" declared Morality, in obvious disgust. "It's her father!—Well," she added, after an interval, "I'm glad he came. She needs some one to look after her."

The riders "looked after" her indeed; and obviously it was their purpose to continue to look after her, for when, half an hour later, the stage pulled out of Lordsburg, the horde of riders accompanied it. Some rode ahead of the vehicle; others trailed it at a little distance; and still others rode, when the width of the trail permitted, beside it. So it went, through the night.

Late in the afternoon of the next day, the stage rolled steadily over a vast, sandy level. The horses were running hard; the stage lurched perilously.

"You're way ahead of time, Jim," yelled a rider, addressing the driver. Morality did not hear the driver's reply.

An hour or so before sunset, Morality was aware that the stage was approaching some mountains, for their shadows loomed on the desert and the atmosphere changed. Presently the mountains were on both sides of her; she could see their walls, timber-clad, dark, foreboding, through one of the stage windows.

After a while the stage came to a halt. Morality gazed out of the windows, to look down a slope into an arroyo, a gorge and a distant cañon, and across to the sloping side of a mountain. She felt and heard the driver descending from the box. She saw the riders massed together near the coach. They were talking and pointing. Then the wide-shouldered man who had greeted Anne Pritchard in the restaurant stuck his head into the doorway of the coach.

"Anne," he said, "I ain't told you yet, 'cause I didn't want to worry you none. It's a mighty good thing you didn't take the stage on the twenty-first. The Apaches stopped it hyar and killed all the passengers but one, an' the guard. I stopped the stage hyar, thinkin' you'd like to hear about it."

Anne's face whitened, but she got out of the stage and stood by her father. Flanked by the wild riders, she listened to Pritchard's story. Morality and her consort also descended from the stage to listen. The spot where the stage had been stopped and burned was pointed out, and there, to support the story, were still some charred, cold fragments, mutely testifying. There was the gully into which the unburned portions of the vehicle had been

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thrown, the scarred and twisted metal of the running gear, some of the iron work of the frame, and other débris that could not be identified. The remnants were pitifully few.

Morality suppressed a shriek when the freshly mounded earth of the long trench containing the bodies of the slain was pointed out, and the skin of her face and throat turned yellow as parchment when the dark stains on the rocky floor were identified. She asked to be led back into the coach, where she sat, white of face, whimpering.

"Just think!" she told her husband. "It might have been you and me."

LOOKING out of the window, the lady saw Anne Pritchard's face as for an instant it was turned toward the coach. The girl was pale, but her lips were pressed tightly together and her eyes were glowing with fierce delight.

"I'm proud of all of you!" she declared.

She clung to Pritchard, but when she had spoken she had been looking straight at Blakeslee. The chief of the Smoothfaces flushed, then gazed triumphantly at Tennessee Bob, who was standing near, behind Anne.

Pritchard told Anne about the finding of the young girl, the daughter, apparently, of the man and woman passengers. He had taken her to the fort, where she was under the surgeon's care, and he hoped that by the time the stage arrived at the fort the girl would have regained consciousness.

"The fiends!" was Anne's only word.

"Blakeslee was mighty upset," declared Pritchard. "When we busted into hyar, the stage was on fire, and the Apaches was doin' a victory dance around it. Thar wasn't no sign of you, and I reckon Blakeslee went plumb loco. After he'd killed half a dozen Apaches, him and his boys tore out into the pass huntin' more of 'em. They was gone all night; and the next mornin', after we'd found the gal and I'd taken her to the fort, Blakeslee comes in after killin' some more Apaches, dead tired and discouraged. When Lieutenant Cabot told him that you wasn't on the stage, he flopped down betwixt two dead Apaches.—Fainted from joy, I reckon."

Blakeslee's face and neck were crimson. "I was bushed, Pritchard," he expostulated.

"Wal, mebbe bushed is just as good a word as fainted," laughed Pritchard.

"Anway, thet Army surgeon—what's his name?—told me thet what you'd got was somethin' he called a reaction."

"Let's go on, father," persuaded Anne. "I want to see the little girl. Perhaps I can do something for her."

Blakeslee stepped forward to assist Anne, but Tennessee was at her side first. Blakeslee's eyes blazed with passion. He stood rigid. He saw the smile she gave Tennessee as she settled into the rear seat of the coach. He wheeled abruptly, mounted his horse and rode alone down the pass, westward.

THE stage rolled on into the pass, the long train of riders trailing it. Twice more, gazing out of the windows, the lady from the east saw gruesome objects that set her to shuddering.

When the stage came to a halt before the gates of the fort, Cabot's cavalrymen hailed it with a cheer; and Anne, blushing, glad that her face could be seen only dimly, in the semi gloom, descended quickly and ran inside the walls, seeking the injured

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child. The stage was hours ahead of time, and so the driver drove on to the station, while Blakeslee and his men and Pritchard's Indians sought amusement, rest and food.

Pritchard followed Anne inside the walls, and presently they were standing in a small room which was scrupulously clean and neat and illuminated by a candle in an earthenware candle stick upon a shelf above the cot upon which, lying on her back, her face pale and drawn, was the lone survivor of the passengers on the ill-fated stage. Seated near her was the surgeon, peering at her intently, searchingly, with professional interest and an entirely unprofessional sympathy and concern.

The surgeon heard Anne and Pritchard enter, but he did not turn. They softly moved across the room and stood, watching. Then the surgeon seemed to become aware of their presence, for he admonished them to silence by raising a warning hand. Pritchard and Anne saw that the child's eyes were open. She was staring up at the surgeon with a bewildered and puzzled expression, as if she were fighting for clarity of thought.

The surgeon smiled, spoke. "Do you feel better?"

The child nodded. She looked at Pritchard, then at Anne, and seemed reassured. A smile, wan and expressive of trust, tugged at the corners of her mouth.

She closed her eyes as if weary, and then lifted a hand and felt of the wound on her forehead. Then she opened her eyes again and gazed steadily up into the surgeon's face.

"I remember now," she said with startling calmness. "The Indians. I saw them lighting a fire. They killed the driver. The stage swerved and the door flew open. I fell out." There was puzzled interrogation in her gaze. It seemed that she was studying their faces.

"Where are aunty and uncle?" she asked.

The three watchers were silent. All possessed courage, but none had enough to speak at this moment. The child's eyes grew wider, her gaze intent, speculative, full of knowledge.

"I know," she said. "The Indians killed them." She closed her eyes again, shuddered and became still—so still that the surgeon leaned anxiously forward and took her hand. Instantly her eyes opened again and she gazed upward fearlessly, steadily.

"They weren't all Indians," she added, after a pause during which the three watchers were silently uncomfortable. "There was one white man."

"A *white man?*" exclaimed the surgeon, startled, horrified.

"My God!" gasped Anne.

"A white man!" said Pritchard, huskily. His face turned ashen with rage and horror. His eyes grew wild and fierce as he stared at the child. His wide shoulders jerked spasmodically; the muscles of his neck grew corded; his lips became two straight white lines that gleamed like alabaster through his black beard.

"Hell and blazes!" he growled, deep in his throat. "A white man!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A PROMISE.

"THAR'S a polecat white man loose in this kentry!" declared Pritchard.

He had just left the hospital room in the fort and was standing in the doorway of the mess house, gazing in

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at soldiers, Smoothfaces, and the men of his own outfit, who were seated at a long table, eating. Several candles, placed at intervals on the table top, flickered weakly upon the faces that were turned toward Pritchard. A silence fell; the business of eating was suspended. Blakeslee got to his feet and stood staring hard, for he knew from the wild gleam in Pritchard's eyes that the man was suppressing his furious rage.

"What do you mean, Pritchard?"

"I mean this. Thar was a white man with thet band of Apaches thet burned up the stage."

Startled eyes stared down the table at Pritchard. There was a concerted roar of rage.

"How do you know that?" inquired Blakeslee.

"Thet little white gal has just come to. She seen him."

The men stared at Pritchard, at one another. Their bronzed faces, only partially visible to Pritchard in the candlelight, seemed to whiten.

"Renegade!" exclaimed a voice.

"Did the gal know him, Pritchard?"

"She's too weak to talk," said Pritchard. "I reckon she don't know who he is, seein' she's a stranger. But I'm hopin' thet soon as she's able to talk she'll tell us more about him. The question is, what air we goin' to do about it?"

The men crowded around Pritchard at the doorway, but he could tell them nothing beyond the mere fact that the girl had declared she had seen a white man among the Indians when the stage had been attacked. Their contempt of a white man who would aid savages in attacking other white men was inexpressible. They had no words except epithets to characterize him, and these, despite the passion that clothed them, were futile. The deed had been done; the renegade had escaped.

They stood in front of the stockade now, out in the moonlight, the mountains towering around them.

"We'll hear of him again," said a rider. "Sooner or later, we'll larn his name."

Down at the stage station they found Tennessee. When they told him what they knew he said nothing.

AFTERWARD, in the shadows of the walls of the stockade, Anne confided to Bob the story of her experience with Lieutenant Fallon at El Paso. He was elated, exultant, filled with admiration. His lady had vindicated his trust in her.

"Loyal," he said, and kissed her again and again. And once more, voicing his ecstasy, he whispered, laughing, "So you sent him and his commission back to the barracks? I'm sorry for him, Anne. No commission could console me for losing you.—But look, Anne—look at the sky and the mountains, and the moon shining on the east slope of old Mount Graham.—So you told him you'd never be lonesome in this country?" He paused, adding, "I promise to do my best to make you happy."

After a while they walked arm in arm to the stage station, where they found Pritchard and his outfit, and the Smoothfaces, clustered around the gates. Morality and Patience and the surgeon were there, too, and the surgeon announced that not for several days could the injured girl be removed. And so it was decided that all of them should await the coming of the next westbound stage, due in three days.

Later that night, the delayed stage rolled out of the fort and into the mellow moonlight that drenched Sul-

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phur Springs Valley. It bore Morality and Patience, and was accompanied only by the regular guard.

Lieutenant Cabot gallantly offered Anne his sleeping quarters, and in spite of the lady's protestations moved his belongings out. Tennessee slept in the stage station. Pritchard and the Smoothfaces stretched themselves out on the ground inside the stockade, around which sentries paced all through the night.

Blakeslee could not be found. On a great flat rock in the cañon outside the walls of the stockade he had spread out his blankets to sleep. He had seen Anne and Tennessee emerge from the gates of the stockade and walk toward the stage station, arm in arm, close together.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TELLTALE FOOTPRINTS.

WHEN, three days later, the westbound stage pulled out of Fort Bowie bearing Anne and Pritchard and the little girl, together with two male passengers from El Paso who rode on the roof, it was accompanied by Blakeslee and his Smoothfaces, Pritchard's Indians, and the regular guard.

Anne Pritchard was the only one of the entire company who did not speculate upon Tennessee's decision to remain at Fort Bowie. Anne knew why Tennessee had stayed at Fort Bowie. She had expostulated with him, to no avail, and in the end she had been prevailed upon to agree with him.

Pritchard, discovering only an hour before the stage pulled out that Tennessee wasn't to accompany them, gazed quizzically at him.

"Not ridin' with us?—Hmmm!" He looked at Anne, who at that moment was standing in front of the stage station. "Hmmm!" he said again, squinting his eyes at Tennessee. "Blakeslee's goin' along," he added.

"Yes."

Pritchard rubbed his beard. "You ridin' back to El Paso?"

"Maybe."

"Ain't you scared Cochise will git you, ridin' alone?"

Tennessee smiled, but said nothing.

"Stage is light," commented Pritchard. "Only two men passengers besides myself. I'm riding' inside with Anne. I reckon Blakeslee'll ride thar, too. He's a sort of a forward cuss with women."

Tennessee smiled at him.

"So you ain't worryin' none, eh?" laughed Pritchard.

"None," answered Tennessee.

Lieutenant Cabot had also been interested in observing Tennessee's movements. He had been standing near the stage while it was loading its passengers, and during those few minutes he had been more occupied with Anne Pritchard than with Tennessee.

Tennessee had taken leave of Anne before the time set for the departure of the stage, and only Tennessee could have interpreted the glance that Anne Pritchard gave him when the stage started.

There was a scurrying of horses, a shout from the driver, and the stage was whirling into Sulphur Springs Valley. A hand fluttered in the rear window.

Lieutenant Cabot turned, to see Tennessee standing near him. "So you're staying behind, eh?"

"Yep."

"The injured girl's name is Mary Meade," announced Cabot presently, when the stage coach had rolled away

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from them a number of yards. "She remembered that much. The man was her uncle. Her father's dead; her mother too. No relatives at all, now. It'll be kind of tough for her."

"Pritchard will take care of her," said Tennessee. "She'll be company for Anne."

The two sat on a bench in front of the stage station, and watched the stage coach grow smaller in the vast stretch of desert. Tennessee had no liking for Lieutenant Cabot, and there was little that he cared to say to him. And Cabot, perhaps remembering the incident of his breach of faith with Tennessee, found that words did not come easily. Yet Cabot was curious.

"YOU'VE been spending quite a little time in the pass, during the last couple of days," he said. "Find what you were looking for?"

"No."

"Expect to?"

"Yes."

"Could I inquire what it is you're looking for?"

"You could."

Cabot smiled mirthlessly. "I'd get no answer, I suppose."

"Your penetration does you credit, suh," drawled Tennessee, his words mellowed with a Southern flavor.

Rising, stretching, Tennessee entered the station enclosure. Lieutenant Cabot returned to the fort.

Ten minutes later, Tennessee rode alone out into the pass; and half an hour afterward he was sitting in the saddle, near the spot where the stage had been burned.

The pass drowsed in the brilliant sunshine. Peace, like a benediction, engulfed it. There was no sound, no motion; yet for a long time Tennessee sat in the saddle, calmly scanning the slopes and the ridges, the arroyos, the gorges and the crags. When he was certain that no Indians lurked in the vicinity he dismounted, trailed the reins and began to move about as if searching for something.

Only Anne had known why he had spent the greater part of the previous two days in the pass. She, too, remembered the meeting with Luke Malpass near the Dragoons, on the trip eastward. Anne had told Tennessee about her meeting with Malpass in Leffingwell's store, on the day Malpass had murdered the two freighters.

Tennessee had marveled at the furious indignation that still lingered in her when she thought of Malpass.

"He kissed me, Bob!" she said in relating the incident. "Oh, the beast! I should have killed him then. I don't know why I didn't. It happened too suddenly, I guess."

Tennessee moved about, searching. His previous visits to the pass had brought no results; but now, far down the slope in a sand flat, he came upon several footprints. He stood peering at them, estimating their length. Not the shape of the footprints, but the fact that they had been made by a white man's boots seemed to prove Mary Meade's declaration that a white man had been present during the attack on the stage. For there were no other footprints near these. Had there been, he might have concluded they had been made by some of the Smoothfaces, or by the soldiers, for upon entering the lower ground in search of Anne that night, the Smoothfaces had been pursuing the Apaches.

There were many footprints in this spot, showing that a man had stood here for a long time, changing his position now and then. The prints showed that the man was facing the

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trail along which the stage would have to travel. Even though the prints were now more than a week old, they were still distinct. Moreover, continuing his search, Tennessee found a place where a man had kneeled in the sand.

Tennessee knelt in the depressions made by the other man's knees, and discovered that the trail above was visible. Two of the men of the stage guard had been shot, and Tennessee wasn't surprised when, after a search, he found two empty cartridges—rifle cartridges.

HE stood erect, then moved slowly down into a gully, following the footprints. There were two sets, one ascending the slope, one descending. They were not as distinct as the others, but he had no difficulty in following them.

Far down in the bottom of the pass they led into a gorge. But here they were joined by others, so many of them that they obliterated the ones he sought.

There had been many ponies in the gorge. Some iron-shod hoofs; many moccasin tracks. He caught a flash of color in the dense brush, and forcing his way through and up to the base of a small choya he found a red and buff bandana handkerchief clinging to the sharp spikes. Although the bandana was a popular article, chiefly used as a neckerchief, and was worn by many riders, he remembered that he had seen one in Malpass's hip pocket that day in Sulphur Springs Valley, near the Dragoons.

The finding of the bandana was not proof, yet it was additional evidence that a white man had been with the savages when the stage had been attacked. The question was, why had a white man been with the Apaches? What had been his purpose? If the white man had been Malpass, his purpose had been to capture Anne. There was no doubt in Tennessee's mind that Malpass had leagued himself with the Apaches, anticipating that the red men would be blamed for the outrage. Undoubtedly he had found Cochise in the mood to accept him as an ally. The Apache chief would neglect no opportunity to avenge himself for the trick which Lieutenant Cabot had played upon him. Malpass was a rover, a nomad. He had associated himself with various bands of outlaws throughout Arizona and New Mexico, and his depredations had been numerous.

Tennessee was satisfied that he had identified the white renegade. Yet where, in the thousands of miles of wilderness that surrounded the pass, would he be able to find the man. He had no intention of searching. Sooner or later, Malpass, returning to Arizona, would travel through the pass.

Tennessee returned to the stage station at Fort Bowie. He appeared to be resting.

SERGEANT LYTTLE spent much time with Tennessee. When off duty he would sit on the bench in front of the stage station with Tennessee. He was curious. Day after day, Tennessee remained in the vicinity of the stage station or the fort, and the cavalrymen grew exceedingly friendly. One of them, a veteran named Mulvaney, grizzled, sinewy, with keen, humorous eyes, became so interested in Tennessee that at various times he might be seen occupying the bench in front of the stage station with Tennessee and Sergeant Lyttle. Many times the three sat and watched freighters

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pull through the pass, or saw stage coaches arrive and depart.

Once an emigrant train came through. The train parked on a level just outside the pass, and Sergeant Lyttle and Mulvaney observed that Tennessee seemed to be interested in the wagons. Upon one pretext or another, he inspected all of them. He also asked certain questions of the emigrants.

Had there been any Indian trouble in the country between the pass and Deming? Had they seen any Indians? White men—riders—other than themselves? Any smoke signals?

"Seems you're a mighty curious man, Tennessee," observed Lyttle.

Mulvaney grinned slyly at Tennessee. "It's a mon you're lookin' fer," he said. "Thet's why you're hangin' around here. And I'm hopin' you catch him, fer I know who it is you want."

"Who?" asked Sergeant Lyttle, puzzled.

"The rinigade white mon, of course!" declared Mulvaney. "What else would he be wastin' his time fer?"

Slowly, carefully, cleverly, Tennessee had gained the friendship of these two men. And now, certain of this, he confided to them his suspicions of the identity of the culprit.

He exhibited the buff and red bandana which he had found clinging to the choya bush. He told them that Malpass had owned such a handkerchief; that he had seen it dangling from the man's hip pocket near Dragoon Springs.

"Seems you're right, Tinnessee," declared Mulvaney. "But how on earth are you goin' to prove that the boot tracks and the knee prints and the handkerchief belong to him? And how, even if you can prove it, are you goin' to git him to admit it?"

Then Tennessee took these men further into his confidence, and sitting upon the bench in front of the stage station, they planned for Malpass's discomfiture, should he one day return to Arizona through Apache Pass.

Two weeks had passed since the burning of the stage, and now another ten days went by.—But no Malpass.

Even Tennessee's conviction that Malpass would ultimately ride through for the purpose of viewing the scene of the massacre became shaken.

The time approached when Tennessee decided he would wait one more day. And then Malpass came.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TRAPPED.

IT was mid morning, and Tennessee, Mulvaney and Sergeant Lyttle were sitting in their accustomed place against the wall of the stage station when they saw a lone rider coming through the pass.

Tennessee recognized him as he mounted a slope leading out of the cañon-like entrance. He apprised his friends of the rider's identity.

"So that's the spalpeen," said Mulvaney.

"I've seen that jasper comin' through here before," declared Sergeant Lyttle.

Malpass passed the fort, waving a greeting at some of the cavalrymen, then rode on down the trail toward the stage station. Malpass would water his horse at the station before entering the dry, hot Sulphur Springs Valley.

Riding close he gave the three men who were seated on the bench a sharp, appraising glance, recognizing Tennessee. There was a question in his eyes as they met Tennessee's, but he saw

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nothing but a calm and steady serenity in Tennessee's gaze.

Yet as he dismounted he directed alert glances at them for he knew that their calmness and apparent disinterestedness might be feigned.

He sauntered over to a point in front of the bench and stood there, arms folded, his hat drawn well down over his eyes.

"Takin' it easy, eh?"

The three upon the bench looked up at him. Tennessee's glance was expressionless; Sergeant Lyttle carelessly saluted, soldier fashion; Mulvaney grinned, his eyes gleaming enigmatically. Only Mulvaney answered.

"Yep," he said.

It appeared that Malpass had interrupted a conversation. That these men could talk of trivialities in his presence merely added to his conviction that he was not suspected.

"Well," he said. "A man don't get much excitement around here, I reckon," his curiosity drove him on. He added:

"There was some excitement, though, I heard. They were tellin' me in Deming that the Apaches had raided a stage in the pass. Guard, passengers and driver massacred. That correct?"

"It is," answered Mulvaney.

Malpass looked at Tennessee.

"The stage company needs better guards, I reckon."

Tennessee ignored the insult.

As if affected by a recollection of the intensity of the fight, Mulvaney reached behind him and drew from his right hip pocket a large buff and red bandanna which he spread on his knees.

"What's that you have there, Mulvaney?" Sergeant Lyttle asked.

"Which?"

"That thing you've spread out on your knees."

"It's a handkerchief," declared Mulvaney. "Can't you see that, mon? And it's a beauty, too."

"You never got that in the cavalry, Mulvaney," declared Lyttle.

"I'm not sayin' I did. I found it."

"Where?"

"Over in Sulphur Springs Valley, near the Dragoons, whin we was comin' back to the fort after plantin' Noonan."

THERE was a long silence. All four of the men were staring at the handkerchief.

"I've never seen one like that before," said Sergeant Lyttle. He was gazing at Malpass. "She's sure got color," he said, referring to the handkerchief. "But I wouldn't want to carry anything as bright as that; would you, mister?"

Malpass suddenly reddened. His lips turned white; there was a wild, suspicious and frightened gleam in his eyes. "Hell, no," he said huskily. "I never owned a thing like that."

There it was—the lie! Malpass had stepped into the trap they had prepared. Guiltless, he would have acknowledged ownership of the glaring buff and red fabric which Tennessee had seen sticking from his hip pocket in the vicinity of the Dragoons.

He was now divining the significance of the talk. Too late he realized that he had tacitly confessed. His body jerked; his eyes flamed with sudden fury. He reached for the gun at his hip.

Tennessee's six-shooter was in his right hand. It was leveled at Malpass; and Tennessee's voice, low, cold, warned him: "Don't move, Malpass."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

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Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

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CRITICISM of a Coast Guard murder plot:

Huntington, L. I.

"The Barbarian" was splendidly written, and I am looking forward to more stories of the same kind. But as usual I would have failed to get around to writing, had it not been for Perry's "By the Deep Six." Perhaps my memory has gone back on me, but there was a time when I used to get a big kick out of "heaving the lead" (on a destroyer as well as larger ships), and the whole story seemed to ring false to me.

Frankly, it sounds as though the author thinks the "hand lead" is taken in the hand, and swung *past* the head, instead of being at the end of 12, 15 or perhaps 18 feet (2, 2½ or 3 fathoms) of line, and of course swung *over* the head. As to soundings with the hand lead at 15 knots—I must leave it to someone else to question this, but it seems to me pretty fast, both for getting bottom and for crossing a bar where soundings are necessary. As for the lead being in the leadsman's hands between heaves (as the author states), it certainly would not under those circumstances, nor would it be likely that the lead-line would be cast off from the chains as soon as the soundings were completed, and stretched out to dry—it would probably be coiled and left hanging in the chains, tied at the top of the coil. And the reference to the lead "hanging straight up and down as the ship pulled it through the sea!"

Now, for mechanical details—I don't believe anyone could bore a 1¼ inch hole through a lead, "leaving the thinnest shell of metal," with a brace and (wood) bit. In a lathe, or with a metal drill in a drill press, it could be done, with careful workmanship. But surely any leadsman would notice the difference in weight the minute he started to swing it, even though the shavings were stuffed back in the cavity. Quite a difference between the weights of such a mass of lead and dynamite!

And finally, to think that any "clever" murderer would risk the finding of a portion of the lead, perhaps still at the end of the line, which would reveal that it had been doctored—and the ordnance records showing the gunner to be short a stick of dynamite!

STRANGER.

AND the author's defense:

Aside from elisions necessary because I was writing for landsmen and with no space for explanations, I believe you'll find the story technically sound.

To begin with, I've been a quartermaster in the navy myself. You misinterpret the phrase "past the head," as is clear when you say the lead is swung on a minimum of two fathoms of line. On battle wagons, yes, but in a Coast Guard patrol boat there isn't twelve feet of freeboard, but about six. The lead does go over the head, if you insist, but also past it, and not too far away to be very nasty in case of explosion.

Soundings with the hand lead at fifteen knots is very fast, though possible, I believe, where its depth isn't over a fathom or fathom and a half over the bar. With the next point I must take issue with you: leaving a lead in the chains is slovenly practice. They were always dried along the rail and stowed as soon as possible. By "hanging straight up and down" I meant to describe the position of a lead line just as the sounding is taken.

On the mechanical detail you are wrong. Lead, particularly if held in a vise between wood blocks, is easier to work than wood, since it has no grain to split or throw the drill out of line. As to noticing the difference in weight—some men might, but this man handled the weight before the fatal cast, and didn't.

On the next point I'm inclined to think you are right. Perhaps the police would have gotten him if they found the cupped out end of the lead. On the other hand, such soft metal might have been distorted by the explosion, and the police must still prove how, when, and by whom the lead was doctored.

To be frank, the dynamite worried me—because dynamite isn't carried on Coast Guard patrols, as far as I know. Guncotton, used for demolition work, or smokeless powder taken

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from a powder bag, and far more difficult to trace, would have suited the purpose of my story better, for guncotton is less bulky and more explosive than dynamite, and would have enabled more lead scraping to be used and the lead brought nearer its proper weight.

But I would have had to explain what guncotton is, and why it was aboard. Everybody knows about dynamite, and about what it'll do. Nevertheless I apologize for deliberately substituting a land explosive in a sea yarn.

RALPH R. PERRY.

WESTERN storyitis?

Toronto, Ontario.

Reading tastes run in cycles and it is the duty of all good magazine editors to cater to this taste. Right now ARGOSY seems to be having a very bad case of Western storyitis. I do not object to one novelette each issue, but when you run one Western serial after another—I do object. Western stories are all the same—no matter who writes them. A hero—so fine and true—he must be dead; a girl—so helpless and weak—she should be dead; a villain, sort of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde character; and then the most important ingredient of the mess—a gun which never misses no matter how it is shot and a horse faster and more intelligent than any other horse on this earth. Sheer rot, I call it. My second and only other dislike is animal stories such as "Shade and the Glutton."

My likes—any story by Erle Stanley Gardner, John H. Thompson, Theodore Roscoe, Albert Payson Terhune, Fred MacIsaac, Loring Brent and A. Merritt. Stookie Allen's "Men of Daring" and "Stranger Than Fiction," by John S. Stuart.

JAMES GARTLAND.

San Jose, Calif.

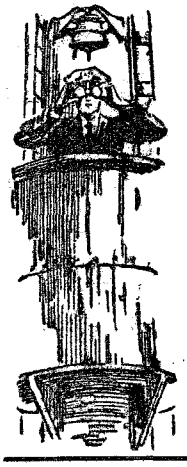
A few weeks ago I bought my first ARGOSY and became engrossed in Mr. MacIsaac's thrilling serial, "The Devil and the Deep."

Since that fatal day I have harbored a growing suspicion of being tricked.

ARGOSY has become an irresistible habit; and now each week sees one of my hard-earned dimes go to satisfy that habit.

Something, I say, should be done to guard the innocent readers against such a ruse.

C. J. ROSSIO.



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Richard Howells Watkins

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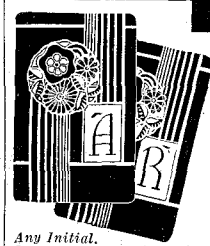

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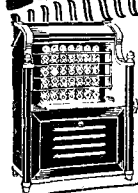

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